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What More Is There To Be Said? Modern Poets on Visual Art

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Submitted in part-fulfilment of the M Phil in Creative Writing,
University of Glamorgan, July 2004.

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Abstract

This paper sets out to examine the different ways in which visual art can play a role in poetry. It:

(i) looks at a variety of poems about representational art to assess in what ways such poems do or do not work effectively (*Chapter 1: Representing Representation: Introductory Remarks*);

(ii) examines the application of ekphrastic approaches to such texts, using the well-established critical ground of William Carlos Williams' poems on Brueghel, and compare the issues which this highlights (*Chapter 2: Representation and Ekphrasis: critics on Williams on Brueghel*);

(iii) looks at the book-length sequence *A Colour for Solitude*, which is sparked off by paintings, to see what strategies this approach facilitates and to explore the impact of the poems before and after the reader has seen the paintings to which they refer (*Chapter 4: A Sequence Before and After the Visual: Sujata Bhatt's 'A Colour for Solitude'*)

(iv) considers to what extent the approaches applied above might operate in the different contexts of abstract and conceptual art (*Chapter 5: The Challenge Of Abstraction*, and *Chapter 6: The Conceptual Turn In My Own Poems About Art*).

It is not straightforward to distinguish those three different types of visual art - representational, abstract and conceptual - as it will be apparent that a good representational picture is likely to contain both abstract and conceptual qualities, that representational references can be read into almost any abstract work, that conceptual work will often represent something, etc. But I think these broad distinctions are useful, as it will become clear from the poetic examples how the characteristic focus of responses to these differing types of visual work do differ in practice.

In the course of this analysis, I will use my own poems about art as examples, especially in the case of conceptual art, where other examples are scarce. I will suggest that ekphrasis - in essence the 'speaking out' of the work of art - works well where representational art is involved, but that it is difficult to do this for an abstract or conceptually-based work. Rather, poems from these sources use the work of art more as a jumping-off point from which an emotion, a playful characterisation, or a critical/philosophical route can be taken. That is not to say that these cannot be good poems, but that they struggle to be meaningfully ekphrastic.

I will examine these questions in the context of poems about art - primarily about modern art - by modern poets. Rather than worry at any length about what constitutes the modern, or modernism, I take it for this purpose to be anything written in the last hundred years. I will link this to my own writing practice by including poems of my own..

This paper will, therefore, look at various ways in which poems can use visual art. Whilst more by way of illustrative examples than a scientifically-based survey, I think the examples suggest means by which the use of art - of various types - can act as more than oddly laid-out art criticism or as an indirect way of writing about the world:

- it can provide a notably economical jumping-off point for narrative, descriptive or philosophical poetry, as a more complex shared starting point of writer and reader can be achieved. Auden provides a particularly good example of this. The illustrations from my own writing seek to show how primarily-conceptual art can function in these ways just as more traditionally figurative art can do. My poems tend, though, not to assume that the reader has seen the art work: that is a more feasible approach for conceptual works which tend to rely less on actual visual appearance, though the need to describe the work reduces the economy achievable.
- It can bring with it the resonance of allusion in the same way as reference to other literature. This, of course, depends on the reader having seen, or having access to, if not the actual work or its reproduction, at least a sufficiently similar work (eg one probably has to have seen a Rothko, but not any particular Rothko, to get much out of poems on Rothko). And it is relatively easy for the reader to check on the allusion if necessary - possibly easy relative to the literary equivalent (eg if the work alluded to is a novel, which takes time to read), certainly easy relative to the position say 200 years ago, due to the increased prevalence of reproductions.
- It can enhance the experience of art. Certainly I found that true of Sujata Bhatt's book on Paula Modersohn-Becker. This might be true even if such writing was little more than art criticism dressed up as poetry, but I think Bhatt's poems do have a poetic life of their own which takes them further than that. Nonetheless, I conclude that they are, as poems, substantially enhanced by seeing the art which inspired them.

On the other hand, I am not convinced that poetry can usefully seek to re-enact the experience of a art work, and the ekphrastic analysis of Williams' poems on Brueghel does not persuade me that this is achieved.

However, in analysing my example poems I believe I show that poems can meet my own criteria for a successful poem about a work of visual art: it should work as a poem in itself, the use of the visual art should enhance any other impact, and it should have a positive impact on how the visual work is or can be viewed.

Chapter 1: Representing Representation: Introductory Examples

There are various ways of bringing visual art into a poem. First are two means beyond the scope of this paper:

- the poem uses techniques or approaches associated with (perhaps derived from) art - eg collage in some works of Peter Reading, or surrealism in David Gascoyne; or
- the poem is illustrated by the artist/poet. One thinks of Blake and Lear as obvious examples, and it is true, perhaps reflecting the specialisation typical of the modern age, that this approach is unusual in the last hundred years. It is commoner for visual artists to move towards poetry in how they incorporate words into images (eg Joseph Kosuth, Ed Ruscha, Bruce Naumman, Jenny Holzer, Tracy Emin, Fiona Banner) or for poets to write for books in which the visual art of another will be incorporated. But these are genres in themselves, and not within the scope of this paper, though the strategies involved may (or may not) be similar those in which the work of art has been separately conceived.

This paper will concentrate, rather, on poems about works of art not themselves produced in association with the poem. These can, I think, be classified as follows:

- The poem describes - and, typically, reflects on - a work of visual art which the reader is thought likely to have seen, at least in reproduction. I suspect this type of poem is also a modern trend: in the absence of modern ease of reproduction and/or ease of travel, the extent to which a reader could previously be expected to be familiar with a given work of art was far more restricted. I shall look at poems by Auden, RS Thomas, Larkin, Carole Satyamurti and Tony Curtis, for example, illustrating this approach. A related type of poem within this category is to use the visual image as a jumping off point for a narrative - perhaps otherwise unrelated to the artwork, perhaps going beyond it into, say, the artist's biography. Paul Durcan's poems illustrate this.
- The poem describes, and then typically reflects on, a work of visual art in a way which does not assume that the reader has seen it in any form, though it may well be an advantage if she has seen it. *The Colour of Solitude* provides an extended example. From the reader's point of experience, of course, a poem intended as the first type above will seem to be of this type if she hasn't seen the artwork - and one might not expect that to be too satisfactory.
- The poem describes (reflects on) a work of visual art which, in principle, the reader cannot have seen - either because it is imaginary (perhaps even impossible) or because it is wholly private to the writer. Elizabeth Bishop's 'Large Bad Picture' is an example.

- The poem is 'secretly' based on visual art, eg a poem about a dog is in fact based on a painting of a dog rather than on the dog itself. That may be an allusion which the reader is expected to pick up, in which case the poem is of the first type above with a puzzle/recognition element. Or it may be that this is just a poem about a dog which happened to be inspired by a painting - which starts to undermine the difference between poems at varying levels of remove from the world. I suspect it then isn't usefully considered as a poem about art at all. Thus the four categories collapse into three.

The vast majority of poems recognisably about art fall into the first two categories, and I shall concentrate on those as that allows me to assess the role of the image in the poem.

Perhaps the best-known modern poem using a painting is Auden's 'Musee des Beaux Arts'[i]. This moves neatly from the general to the specific in two ways: first, from the title's reference to the museum as a whole in which the Bruegel painting is housed; and second in moving from the general thesis that 'the Old Masters' understand how suffering goes on alongside everyday trivia (with examples which may come from other paintings in the Museum but are too general to be identifiable as such) to the use of 'The Fall of Icarus' specifically to illustrate that thesis through how the ploughman and others take no apparent notice of Icarus's fall. This has the effect of doubly zooming in on a painting well-enough known - or easily-enough seen - to provide a convincingly concrete example.

This concrete example only comes in the last third of the poem, making 'The Fall of Icarus' seem - appropriately enough - like an illustration of an existing poem/idea rather than, as I suspect it was, its trigger. It is that strategy and the specific details of things going along regardless which make the poem work. The latter suggests a conjunction between the human and animal which has its matching irony in the absurd attempt of Icarus to imitate a bird:

> They never forget
> That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
> Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
> Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
>
> Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.
>
> In Brueghel's *Icarus*, for instance

'Doggy life', in particular, is a strangely resonant way of saying, in a way, nothing: resonant because its colloquial and witty touch contrasts with the portentous fell of 'dreadful martyrdom', so

underlining the irony. By contrast, the actual claim - if it is seriously made by Auden - that 'the Old Masters' understood suffering in a more profound way than we do now seems doubtful, and the observation that trivial life goes on around disaster is less striking than how exactly it is illustrated by the Brueghel, and the appropriate stillness and timelessness the use of the painting brings (an incidental thought is that perhaps the observation itself is less straightforwardly true in the media age: much everyday life *did* stop, worldwide, as the events of September 11, 2001 unfolded).

That said, I suspect Auden is actually being ironic about the old masters' being always right. Why so? Because 'The Fall of Icarus' is far from typical of old master paintings, which are far more likely as a whole to foreground suffering and disaster - frequently, of course, the crucifixion. It is as an exception to that that the Brughuel appeals, and appeals especially to the modern sensibility which (leaving aside 11.9) is in many ways more likely to let disaster have little impact on the smooth flow of life in that we are aware of far more of it through the media, but can do little to intervene in most of what we hear about. That was likely to seem especially true in the contemporary context of the poem, when Hitler had just come to power.

And maybe this links to the tone of the poem: Auden launches into what sounds like a relaxed and informal but donnish lecture. That uninvolved tone suits the theme of how horror has become routine.

Anyway, this is a clear case where the use of the painting enhances the poem. It is also one in which reading the poem enhances appreciation of the painting. Indeed, is sufficiently well-known (perhaps uniquely so) that what it says is probably an automatic part of the process of looking at the painting for at least a significant proportion of its viewers.

That may start to suggest some of the possible criteria for a successful poem about a well-known work of visual art: it should work as a poem in itself, the use of the visual art should enhance any other impact, and it should have a positive impact on how the visual work is viewed. I would also suggest here that the potential problem of being at an 'extra remove' from reality effectively collapses: had Brueghel not painted the scene, then it would have been harder for Auden to convey it - in effect, what we feel is not an indirect link to a reality which is hard to imagine but a direct link to an image we *have* seen.

Those elements may be present, in principle, in poetry about art generally. Auden also exploits something which is more likely to be exclusive to his particular subject and painting: if asked what time and place Musée des Beaux Arts is set in, one might hesitate between ancient Greece, 16th century Flanders and Brussels in the 1930s (the assumed date of Auden's visit) or even now (imagining our own visit). The voice of the poem puts us firmly in the twentieth century, of course,

but the effect is also to suggest the universality appropriate to the theme in a very economical manner.

'The Fall of Icarus' seems to be a fairly natural choice of picture to write about poetically, as there are other examples. Indeed, William Carlos Williams wrote a whole set of 'Pictures from Brueghel' which has become a central text for ekphrastic analysis, to which I shall return in Chapter II.

RS Thomas wrote two long sequences of poems about art: 33 on impressionist paintings in the Louvre, in *Between Here and Now* (1981), and 21 on more modern works, in *Ingrowing Thoughts* (1985). Originally they were all published opposite reproductions of the paintings, though when a selection were brought together in his so-called Collected Poems[ii] the illustrations were dropped. That, I think, was a mistake (or an unfortunate economy - though perhaps it is also why only a selection were included) if you follow the logic of John Powell Ward[iii], who calls Thomas (like Williams) 'a staring poet' and says that:

> In staring at peasant and landscape in the early work, Thomas seemed compelled towards immovable aspects of the human and natural world. These aspects entailed an inner presence or life of growth, birth and death.... But the poet is now looking at objects deliberately designed to be looked at.'

The reproductions, therefore, gave us a chance to *look with* Thomas. And writing about paintings gives Thomas a chance to look at a wider range of scenes than his narrower usual seam allows, and I would say to relax somewhat, less concerned with the search for the articulation of God in the Welsh landscape and people - with depth, in effect - than with the pleasure of surfaces. It is no coincidence, then, that he should initially focus on impressionist paintings.

To look with Thomas you need to see at least reproductions of the paintings (Thomas probably worked from a book anyway[iv]) - which one can regard as a constraint rather than a criticism. What Thomas then provides is, in effect, an impression of an impression. For example, of Manet's 'The Balcony', which reads in full:

> We watch them. They watch
> what? The world passes,
> they remain, looking
> as they were meant to do

at a spectacle
beyond us. It affects them
in several ways. One stares
as at her fortune

being told. One's hands
are together as if
in applause. The monsieur surmounts
them in sartorial calm.

Where this succeeds it is in its exact and economical observation, and in its play with levels of removal from reality: this impression of an impression of the world is echoed by how we watch them watching the world itself. It lacks - does not aim at - the rootedness and the musing on purpose which one finds in poems which look directly at a scene from life. 'Tears', for example[v], presents a scene presumably from life (at least, not attributed to a painting though it does perhaps echo a pieta from visual art) examined at similar length:

The man weeps
in her lap and the woman
looks at him through tears
of anger, dropping her words

like coins in the cap
of a beggar. If he had
my learning, he would hear
Nietzsche whispering. If I

had his strength - between
such absences they
get away with it, the
women, and are not happy.

This feels like a similar staring, with a similar teasing enquiry into the thoughts of those featured, but more assertive in its tone, and more acerbic - as if the distancing device of the painting has a

softening effect. The acerbic tone is characteristic and, I think, a strength in Thomas: one would hardly want him to write mostly about paintings, but it does help add variety.

Carole Satyamurti has also written about 'The Balcony' (see App 2). In contrast to Thomas's placement of the reader as an observer, with him, Satyamurti adopts the voice of one of the three figures shown and enacts through her the imagined psychological drama of the three. I find her tale convincing in that, looking at the picture, one can readily accept her account which, for example, gives a sinister twist to the man to whom Thomas attributes 'sartorial calm':

> I know how his thumb and index finger
> stroke each other, round and round,
> Oh, so slowly.
> A woman's skin: a sheaf of banknotes.
>
> I dig my fingers hard against my fan
> To block the screaming.

That passage is also typical of the poem in its tactility: it brings in the non-visual senses other than sound almost at the expense of the visual - or rather, perhaps, on the basis that Manet has provided the visual and the poem complements that. Thus 'glutton's hands / smelling of sandalwood' and 'cachou breath' add taste and smell to the touch ('cachou' being a lozenge sucked against bad breath), which is itself heightened in an image which is not just non-visual but anti-visual: 'plunge my nails / into those too easy going eyes'. There is an absence of sound descriptions in the poem, for what we hear is the internal sound of the gazing figures. And it's very definite: Thomas muses on what we can't know in the painting - what are they looking at? - where Satyamurti gives a convincing account of another aspect which we can't, in reality, know. We need the picture both to provide the 'missing' visuals, and against which to test the plausibility of her account. Again, a constraint, not a criticism.

Nor do these two poems exhaust the painting. Even in simple terms of what is in it, neither mention the dog, nor the shadowy man in the room beyond the three people on the balcony, nor make much of the black, green and white colour scheme. Nor do either move out from the painting into Manet's life, or into French society at the time, or consider the place of impressionism in art history. What may seem a narrow subject is actually very broad.

Philip Larkin's 'The Card-Players'[vi] can stand as a contrast to the Thomas and Satyamurti poems in that, though clearly based on a typical Dutch or Flemish 17th century painting, it doesn't matter too much which so long as the generic tavern interior is recognised (indeed, I'm not too sure which it is: Teniers and Brouwer and probably others painted reasonable candidates). The poem succeeds brilliantly in taking the generic image as a starting point, and then animating it and animalising its characters into memorable coarseness and hammed-up vulgarity in which it is hard not to take pleasure:

Jan van Hogspeuw staggers to the door
And pisses in the dark.

Larkin is welcoming the retreat into grossness. What lifts the elementalism beyond that kind of exaggeration of the original painting, though, is how the inner piss/gob, snore/fart, fire and place chime with the outer rain, wind, stars and peace:

.....Jan turns back and farts,
Gobs at the grate, and hits the queen of hearts.

Rain, wind and fire! The secret, bestial peace!

This works as a poem in itself, while the use of visual art - though unspecific - is essential to its impact, and it adds a dimension to viewing such tavern pictures. As in Auden's use of Brueghel, the potential problem of being at an 'extra remove' from reality effectively collapses: without the reference it would have been difficult for us to connect with Larkin's vision.

Tony Curtis' take on the rather usefully fussily-titled 'Portrait of the Painter Hans Theo Richter and his wife Gisela in Dresden, 1933' illustrates in passing a practical merit of poems about paintings - they provide an effective means of linking to a collection's cover, in this case *Taken for Pearls*[vii]. That in turn provides a convenient means to show the painting to the reader, which certainly benefits this poem as it contains descriptions of the couple which are strikingly right when the picture is seen, but which lack, for me, the independent pointedness to work as well on their own:

Her face is the moon to his earth.

Otto's studio wall glows
With the warm wheat glow
Of the loving couple

More interestingly, Curtis uses the painting in a way in which it is a commoner strategy to use a photograph (I guess because a photograph feels more like 'proof'), ie to fix a moment in time. Typically, that is done by looking back to the photograph from the present, but Curtis looks back *from* the painting to World War I and the long struggle to recover from it and forward from it *not* to the time of writing (early 1990's) but to Hitler consolidating power and taking the world, and Dresden in particular, into another maelstrom. The theme is what a narrow moment was early 1933 in between those two passages with their respective consequences and causes (if indeed, it was a separable moment at all), and by extension how fleeting might be any moment of love.

This poem works as a poem together with the picture, the use of the visual art enhances the impact, and it enhances looking at the painting. In contrast with Auden's use of Brueghel, however, the painting (which is in Stuttgart) is not well-enough known for the author to expect readers to have seen it, and I don't think the poem would work as well without seeing the painting. My conclusion is that this is a specialist type of second-order work - perfectly valid, but not so well-served by its reproduction in a book with a different cover. I put this to Curtis, who responded that the poem was included in his foreign language selected volumes without any illustration, though he 'nearly always likes to have the art available - certainly for a teaching or performance situation. I usually hold up the *Taken for Pearls* cover at readings when I include the poem' [viii].

So: this chapter has looked at a number of poems about art, but has done so from a non-theoretical perspective, has concentrated on poems which deal with single paintings and has used examples of fairly straightforwardly representational art, not necessarily so very different from writing about the thing represented, although showing that paintings can prove a valuable means of, for example, providing a widely-known starting point (Auden), varying the poet's tone (RS Thomas) or conjuring up a historical world (Larkin) or moment (Curtis) . In the following chapters, I will broaden my approach by considering poems which use art to achieve effects which are less like those which could largely be achieved by writing separately about what is represented.

Chapter 2: Representation And Ekphrasis: Critics On Williams On Brueghel

William Carlos Williams' *Pictures from Brueghel* was published in 1962, 25 years after the Auden. Williams' 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus' [ix] takes a similar view of insignificance:

the edge of the sea
concerned
with itself

sweating in the sun
that melted
the wings' wax

unsignificantly
off the coast
there was

a splash quite unnoticed
this was
Icarus drowning

Perhaps, with Auden in mind, Williams is playing with the theme of insignificance (neatly stressed by using the coined word 'unsignificance') by suggesting that - never mind Auden - 'The Fall of Icarus' is no more worthy of attention than the other nine Brueghel pictures he covers, as it gets no particular prominence. Or maybe (more speculatively) he's even pretending not to have read 'Musée des Beaux Arts': he is, if you like, in the position of the ploughman when it comes to Auden's poem. If so, that way of playing with the modern canon is characteristic of much recent art - eg Gavin Turk's bronzes of cardboard boxes[x] which surprise with their material, as they don't seem much like bronze until kicked, but also echo Warhol's painted wooden copies of Brillo boxes. They seem even more throw-away (the boxes being plain brown) but are made of a more valuable material, but then again Turk's sculptures are worth a lot less than Warhol's in the art market... Williams could be seen as playing himself off against Auden in that kind of manner.

Williams' sequence (or perhaps, set) as a whole has become a fertile ground for the burgeoning field of ekphrastic analysis.

'Ekphrasis' (from the Greek *ek* - 'out' - and *phrazo* - 'to speak') was initially defined fairly narrowly[xi] as the verbal art of visual representation, but has broadened in critical usage[xii] to cover any consideration of the relationships between word and image, and so is equally likely to start from the image as from the word. In the context of this paper, poems about painting are one aspect of the relatively narrow definition.

Murray Kreiger provides an interesting historical account of how ekphrasis has developed in the context of 'notions put forth by literary theorists about the capacity of language to do the work of the visual sign: whether it can, whether it should' [xiii]. He regards the core of ekphrasis as being attempts to imitate in words an object of the plastic arts. If words remain subservient to the plastic arts in the way that implies, then it becomes a doomed-sounding attempt to make 'our ears serve as our eyes' [xiv]. But that subservience can be challenged by the ability of words to convey time ('becoming' as well as 'being' as Kreiger puts it), to depict what does not actually exist (Kreiger takes Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' as his exemplar of this) or even which could not exist (Kreiger cites Homer's long description of the shield of Achilles[xv]) and to convey emotion and thought more fully. Furthermore, a poem can potentially give 'not a visual image of an urn, but a verbal urn and the textual intimations of an existence beyond: what only words can give us by revealing the two at once' [xvi] . And the modernist twist to this might be to add to that an awareness of language as a presence in itself: the verbal urn, the intimation and the text. Indeed, Kreiger believes that we have come (in contrast to, say, the Ancient Greeks) to 'privilege language as supreme among representational media' [xvii] .

All this, of course, tends to contrast language with the visual as represented by traditional painting or sculptural objects. Different issues may arise where the art is based on performance (see eg my poem 'The Language of Bleeding', App 2), if the verbal is integrated with the visual (see 'Rat Race'), or in the case of video art which evidently can directly represent the passing of time, and often makes that one of its subjects (see ' Real Time'). These examples raise issues about how ekphrasis might work in those contexts - which I will not pursue here, but do relate to my later consideration of conceptual art.

Keats himself can be seen to suggest some of Kreiger's account of the historical development of ekphrasis in the argument of the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', for he moves from an initial view that the urn can 'express / A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme' in stanza one to the statement in stanza two that 'Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter', which could be extended to the view that seen works of art are fine, but those unseen could be finer.

Consistent with Kreiger's discussion, Grant Scott [xviii] provides a summary of the four typical aims of ekphrasis which fits well with poems on art:

- To describe the visual art object as vividly as possible
- To create a narrative out of the frozen moment that the artwork represents, typically (eg Keats in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn') exploiting 'the tension between motion and stillness'.
- To utilise another tension, namely that between 'the writer's inclination to uphold the temporal and spatial distinctions between the arts and...the desire to collapse the borders and treat the visual scene as if it were imaginatively coextensive with the poet's own world'
- Helping the 'mute' image to speak out while praising the virtuosity of the painter or sculptor.

What strikes me about this list is how little it repeats my own more intuitive list (see page xx) of what a good poem on art should be about. True, 'helping the mute image speak' might lead to a poem enhancing the encounter with the work of visual art described, but the aims of ekphrasis would seem consistent with poems which are mainly descriptive, don't really do a lot independent of that description, and don't actually utilise the visual art in an way which enhances the poem. Maybe those things are taken as read, but if not then the Williams set on Brueghel is worth looking at as a potential illustration of ekphrasis not being enough.

As Ban[xix] says, 'Pictures from Brueghel' can seem unambitious, both as 'straight descriptions of the paintings without... any meta-artistic statement' and - showing his own value judgment in his choice of verb - as 'a lapse into conservatism', with Williams turning towards the past in contrast to the *avant garde* experiments of his earlier poetry. And it is true enough that Williams describes ten Brueghels in a generally straight and economical way to show how:

Brueghel saw it all
and with his grim

humor faithfully
recorded
it

Initially, they read more as a tribute than a distinctive take on Brueghel. It's an attractive sequence, but wouldn't we be better off looking at the paintings? And if we did, would our view of them be much influenced by Williams?

One way into considering how Williams' poems might be aiming at more than this is to contrast them with those of Paul Durcan, in his National Gallery collection *Give Me Your Hand*[xx]. Durcan takes to an extreme the use of paintings as visual cues. From them he builds whimsical narratives using eccentric dramatic monologues: van Gogh's mother defends her son's sanity; Rousseau's tiger talks to us from an old people's home; the barber from Rubens' Samson and Delilah tells us what Delilah said to him about Samson as if he were the singer, Tom Jones; Gainsborough's Mrs Andrews plots Mr Andrews' murder... So far as I can tell, this is essentially light entertainment, but these poems do, I think, succeed as poems about art: the paintings (which do for the most part have to be seen in order to follow the poems) are utilised, one can look afresh at a painting through the poems, and the poems work as witty tales. This is a complete contrast with Williams' scrupulous avoidance of any narrative speculation, even though Brueghel tends to invite it. Indeed, he emphasises the reading of a still image even when that image is itself one of movement, e.g. in 'The Hunters in the Snow':

> The over-all picture is winter
> icy mountains
> in the background the return
>
> from the hunt it is toward evening
> from the left
> sturdy hunters lead in...

One is continually reminded that this is a *painting* of hunters returning, not hunters returning. Such a deliberate strategy suggests more than imitation. So what else do these poems do? I take them, potentially, to involve appropriation, structural imitation and self-reflection.

Appropriation is, of course, a quintessential strategy of modern art, often traced back to Duchamp's found objects (and Williams was an admirer of Duchamp). It reflects the shift in primary concern away from a traditional skill-based view of art, emphasising technique and form, to a concern with function, with its typical emphases on context and concepts. Such appropriation may involve recycling either popular images or art of the past (both typical strategies of Warhol, for example), using the original but with a difference of intention, context and presentation. Williams can be seen as trying to recycle Brueghel's paintings into words.

Why paintings? Because that brings cultural mediation, on which Williams can comment, and because paintings allow scope to write about both the representation and the thing itself, allowing Williams to play with the two in a way which direct consideration of objects would not allow. It also allows Williams to be selective (and even misleading in some cases - he certainly misdescribes 'The Corn Harvest' by giving the impression that the women in it are not working) in a way which allows his selectivity to be noticed and interpreted as the reader can make a comparison with the painting. This returns to how paintings can be *more* immediately present to the reader, even though what they show is at an extra remove from reality. Why these paintings? Perhaps to cut across the expected narrative and historical interpretations which Williams wishes to show he does not wish to pursue.

Such an appropriation is not easy to achieve. Appropriation typically works within the visual (or, it could be argued, though it is outside my scope, within the verbal or the musical through quotation). It is easy enough to move from the visual to the verbal through a description, but because that is so natural, what extra factor will distinguish appropriation? The answer should, I think, be that one feels the picture somehow present in the poem, not just described by it. Obviously that will be harder to achieve than it is for a snow shovel to be present in Duchamp's *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, which, after all, *is* a snow shovel.

I suggest that structural imitation would be the key to making such an appropriation convincing. As Scott puts it[xxi] 'Williams' eye moves through the picture rather than moving the figures within it' and he 'never attempts to project the scenes beyond their suspension in Brueghel's spatial composition'. And the primary means for achieving this is through what Sayre[xxii] calls 'hard enjambment', which leads to what Hollander terms 'revisionary disclosure', whereby the syntax 're-visions' the picture by displacing the meaning across lines and forcing the eye to track back and forth in a parallel way to ranging over a picture. This takes the form of breaking meaning across lines and eschewing punctuation. For example from 'The Hunters in the Snow', lines 1 and 6 in the following show this especially clearly:

between his antlers the cold
inn yard is
deserted but for a huge bonfire

that flares wind-driven tended by
women who cluster
about it to the right beyond

the hill is a pattern of skaters

Sayre's view looks plausible, though the role of the hard enjambment would be more convincing were it not also a tendency in other late Williams poems in which, if there is a reason for it, it can't be the same ekphrastic one. I suspect it is simply a mannerism. However, it might be a mannerism which happens to be especially appropriate to this set of poems.

But here I think there is a more fundamental problem. Is this in fact a sensible account of how the eye examines a picture? I think not, as studies[xxiii] have shown that the eye typically focuses around a point or points of interest to which it returns repeatedly, moving from there to other features of the picture. The eye is less programmatic than Williams' verbal descriptions of how it examines a picture.

If there is a sense in which the paintings are present in the poems, it is probably the negative one that in which there is nothing else in the poems - Williams does not speculate at all about Brueghel's world, or what might motivate his characters, or what narrative might lie behind the actions shown. Scott contrasts this with the classical ekphrasis in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', in which Keats 'eagerly supplies the urn with a dynamic story', and a similar contrast could be drawn with most of the poems considered in Chapter One above. However, this absence of such development again sounds like a method of description as much as like appropriation.

I am, then, unconvinced by the claim for structural imitation. Williams himself stated that he 'attempted to fuse poetry and painting... to give a design. A design in the poem and a design in the painting should make them more or less the same thing'. I'm not sure that he succeeded in that aim. And, given that, it doesn't seem especially useful to talk of 'appropriation' rather than description and reference to paintings.

The self-reflection comes in how Williams sets himself apart, making us aware of his gaze - reflecting the inactive role of an old, ill man. This may be why he begins with what he takes to be Brueghel's self-portrait[xxiv]. That is described as showing a man showing no signs of manual labour but with his eyes 'red-rimmed / from overuse' - ie from looking, from the gazing activity which is Williams' in this set of poems. Perhaps it is going too far to put this forward as a covert self-portrait of Williams in turn (though that doesn't stop Ban, who states straightforwardly that 'these poems on Brughuel's paintings are actually all self-portraits of and by Williams himself, in which he expresses the desires of an ageing poet'), but there is a sense of the poet as observer holding himself

back. It is emphasised by the typically aerial perspectives which Williams takes: the is no sense of the observer wanting to get closer to the action, let alone involved in it.

Nonetheless, I have a suspicion behind all this: that *Pictures from Brueghel* - and their analysis - depend crucially for their effect on having been written by Williams and at the time he wrote them. Duchamp's urinal brings with it a specific moment in art history without which it makes no sense, and being just any urinal cannot now be the point (even if it was originally the point!) - its being Duchamp's chosen urinal is vital to that context. Similarly, the same poems written by an unknown with no past publishing context perhaps *would* be straightforward descriptions, rather oddly chopped up. And that is in one way appropriate, tying Williams' ekphrasis in to artistic practice - but in another way it is troubling because it locates value outside the actual content of the work - in *why it is*, rather than in *what it is*. And that is not only controversial in visual art (and lies behind much of the popular dismissal of modern art), but is a less well-established approach in poetry.

My own view is that the approach is a perfectly valid one, but at the same time it can lead to limitations, not so much because 'anyone can do that' as because the aesthetic component may recede too far into the background and one ends up with something interesting, but not all that stimulating. That can happen in visual art, and I think it happens in Williams, too: interesting, but compared with Auden on Brueghel, not all that stimulating as poems to be read rather than as texts to be discussed

Chapter 3: Before and After the Visual - Sujata Bhatt's 'A Colour for Solitude'

Sujata Bhatt's book *A Colour for Solitude*[xxv] is a 100-page sequence of 57 poems, which focuses on Paula Becker (Modersohn-Becker), an important early modernist artist (1876-1907), and on her friendship with the sculptor Clara Westhoff. Paula went to live in the artist's colony at Worpswede, northern Germany, in 1898 and married fellow painter Otto Modersohn in 1901. Rainer Maria Rilke married Clara just before that, but there is at least a suggestion that he was also attracted to Paula. As it was, Paula remained close - and, her diaries hint, attracted to - both, though her jealousy was evident when Clara and Rilke moved away from Worpswede.

She wrote to Clara '..it seems to me that you have shed much of your old self in order to lay it at the feet of your king like a cloak for him to walk over'[xxvi]. She lived sporadically in Paris, where Rilke was Rodin's secretary, returning to Worpswede from time to time, where Otto remained. She died shortly after giving birth, aged 31, to her only child.

A Colour for Solitude is an unusually sustained piece of poetry related to painting. Bhatt structures it by using Paula's paintings - principally self-portraits - as titles and starting points for 35 of the poems - through which Paula speaks. Most of the titles for the paintings are Bhatt's, and so they are able to act as headline descriptions rather than leaving the text to describe another plainly-titled 'Self-Portrait'. Bhatt varies the voices and modes of address by having Paula address herself in her portraits; speaking to Paula as a 'neutral narrator'; by using semi-imagined letters from both Paula (to Clara, Otto, Rilke and her sister) and Clara (to Rilke, also referring to Clara's sculpted bust of him, and to Paula, some also with references to sculpture) as the framing device for a further 17 poems; and adopting her own voice directly for the five last poems in which Bhatt follows Clara into her own time and place in Bremen - near Worpswede - where she herself lives.

The book is more concerned with the development of and relationships between the three protagonists than it is with exploring their various arts, but the art forms an important context as well as being the starting point for many descriptions. My previous familiarity with Becker's paintings was minimal, so this made this sequence a good candidate for looking at how the poems work without seeing the paintings, which they must be intended to do; and for assessing how much it adds (or even takes away due to limiting what can be imagined) to see the pictures. The landscape around Bremen is also a strong presence and, in a curious parallel, Bhatt herself wrote a couple of these poems before she had visited the city (they are reproduced from earlier collections).

I therefore took the chance to consider the poems as a 'free-standing' volume, and then to compare this to my view of them after visiting Bremen to see Becker's paintings, talk to Sujata Bhatt and

find out more about Modersohn-Becker. The following, then, was written in a state of deliberate 'triple ignorance': I had not seen Paula's paintings, I had not read about Paula's life other than through Bhatt's poems, I had not visited Bremen and spoken to Bhatt about her book. I then rectified those ignorances to see what impact that had.

Reacting to the Poems in Isolation

Without seeing the paintings, the sequence comes across as one of narrative poems, relaxed in pace. As a structural narrative device, the use of paintings leads naturally to a feeling of gaps between the images, which after all are still - gaps which author and reader are jointly led to fill in. The description of the paintings is mainly that needed to show the reader what the characters are like - emphasising their psychological states as well as their appearances. Take some typical examples:

> You are all-knowing but innocent.
> Not smiling, not coy, not sad -
> and your face: moonstone white -
> blue-grey shadows make you
> almost marble, almost -
>
> if it weren't for the wash of tan, the tinge
>
> of beige beneath the white:
>
> colours of blanched almonds.[xxvii]
>
> In a dark brown dress
>
> of sturdy cotton
>
> I can become
> a part of the landscape [xxviii]

> My eyes: brownish amber
> sparkle brighter than the necklace
> I wear today - large oval
> beads of amber - so heavy. [xxix]

Those examples illustrate a concern not just with description and psychological states but with colour in particular, which is used descriptively, symbolically and for its implied psychological connections. The quiet style is characteristic of Bhatt, who works by accumulation and modulation

rather than by striking surface effects. This sense of 'feeling towards' is heightened by ending most of the poems with a dash.

The primary question must be whether these descriptions work in terms of building up the psychological picture, not whether they enhance enjoyment of and/or provide believable insights into the paintings once seen. I find they do so work, but that is not the aspect I wish to analyse. That said, there are plenty of descriptions which make one want to compare them with the painting to judge their appropriateness, even if that is not their main purpose. As in any descriptive poem, part of the pleasure is in recognising the appropriateness of the description, especially if it calls attention to something one might not otherwise have noticed. For example:

> Why is this you
> looking like a fourteen-year-old girl
> after two years of marriage?[xxx]

doesn't give me a very clear image, but it does make me want to see the painting to see how it achieves this paradox.

Another question is: are these poems ekphrastic in the sense of the paintings being made to speak? Not quite, I would argue: rather, they provide a spin on ekphrasis by being less about what the painting says than about what the poet says 'through' her paintings. In part that is because, rather than the poems being subservient to the art - concerned primarily with explicating or speaking for it - it is the art which is subservient to the poems here: the paintings are present primarily as a means to present the people. And that may be why - ahead of visiting Bremen - the poems do work without seeing the pictures described.

Three themes are especially prominent in how the self-portraits are used: the use of colour, as already noted, an exploration of the artist's and (implicitly) the viewer's gaze; and the reflection on how self-portraiture - and, by implication, art in general - can be a means of self-transformation.

Virtually every poem in Paula's voice contains colour descriptions, whereas those in Clara or Sujata Bhatt's voices do not. It is as if the difference between the poem and the unseen painting is being deliberately emphasised, together with the colour in Paula's character. Only three of the Paula-voiced poems don't contain colour descriptions, and all for thematic reasons. First, 'Is There More Truth in a Photograph?' [xxxi] which starts from a photograph which, of course, would have been black and white. The absence of colour thus suggests one answer to the poem's title. Second, 'Self-Portrait as a Mask' [xxxii], suggesting that the mask covers the force of Paula's personality as well as her face. Third, 'Otto with a Pipe' [xxxiii], in which she isn't shown but her rather duller husband is.

So: the presence or absence of colour description helps to reinforce personality and perspective. Colours also work symbolically. There is plenty of green for hope ('Self-Portrait as Aubade' - 'however dark this green, / still, there is the fragrance / of a cold spring morning') and for life ('In her green dress , she is / the background and the foreground - / A green dress the colour / of iris stems, / the ones in the background - / ...Green on green on green'), red for energy ('the fire is in your hair') and violence ('A red rose bleeds / into my white dress' and 'Let the scarlet grow sharper / against the white beads'), and white for innocent readiness for love:

The white horse walks up to me

fearless

and eats fresh grass
out of my hands -

So love is fearless -
it must be.[xxxiv]

White and green for girls, bringing their individual characteristics together:

The landscape is green -

It is the green of a fairy tale
for there is so much white
mixed in with the green,
so much white that makes the green unreal.[xxxv]

Blue, more directly, is seen on the wing of a jay as 'Blueness of intense loss, / violence seeped into the feathers'. But in combination with its complementary, orange, though perhaps retaining that element of loss, it counters dullness - risk and loss lie behind all life, after all:

Browns and maroons
at the end of August -
faraway, a dun horse -
faraway and everywhere
the colour of chestnuts
on a dark day - the colour

of dried blood -

These colours need blue
and orange -
But how they must have blue.[xxxvi]

There is plenty more colour, much of which does make me want to see the paintings, for example 'The wind tears all shapes / into a blur of colour' - how does that look? But the most intense use, consistent with its being emphasised by the book's title, comes in the sequence from pages 55-66. The poem 'A Colour for Solitude' itself hints (in what sounds like an echo of Plath's 'Daddy') at a violent strength to Paula's relationship with Rilke, then sets this against the translucence of amber:

Of course I know
your eyes are blue -
So blue I almost married you -
So blue, so heroic,
    it still hurts
to stare you down.
But that is not the point.

The point is today
when you saw me alone,
your eyes got so dark
simply standing by the window
in my amber necklace.

And maybe Rilke can give Paula what she needs as an artist:

Show me
how you live out desire, live out
every urgent desire -
and yet, always remain true
  to yourself.

Give me
a better colour
for solitude.

The next poem, 'Self-Portrait on my Fifth Wedding Anniversary', begins by proposing a colour which could be the colour of solitude, of the space for Paula to find herself fully as an artist, the space which it is easier for Rilke, as a man, to find: 'I will become amber'. Which suggests the beauty of amber itself, the insects often trapped in it (like a woman in an unhappy marriage?) and the possibility as in traffic lights that something is about to go (Paula will soon be pregnant) or stop (she will die in complications after childbirth). The amber is used as almost an incantation:

My eyes: brownish amber
sparkle brighter than the necklace
I wear today - large oval
beads of amber - so heavy....

How would I look
if I were pregnant?
Like this? My nipples, still so pale
would also turn to amber.

The potential child is both part of and an obstacle to this potential self-fulfilment:

This is a self-portrait
in which I don't care
what anyone says.

Exactly five years ago today
we got married - Otto and I.
But this May I am alone
at last with my *self.*
My *self* that now only speaks
to me in Paris.

I need to live
more fully through
the body to find my soul.
Yes, the body, this woman's body
that is mine -
I need to go deeper

into amber.

Should I have a baby?
And if I did?
Then, would my body be able
to teach my soul something new?

This is the crux of the sequence, I think, and of the colours in it. It leads on to the assertion in the following poem ('Self-Portrait as a Nude Torso with an Amber Necklace') that :

This is my soul: Pure roundness -

Beads of pure amber -
It is me and yet beyond me.

But asserting herself is not straightforward: 'Parrot green, lime green, / pistachio green, / yellowish green' reminds us of the multiple greens of growth from 'In Her Green Dress, She Is', but now they are:

Colours of madness, people will say,

colours of insanity -

But if you tell them what you really think
they will turn away, afraid - [xxxvii]

There is less colour, even in Paula's poems, after this point (and those based on a photograph and a self-portrait with mask are among the least colourful poems here) and when colour does appear it indicates discord:

But I am doomed.
Doomed to hold on
to these oddly coloured roses
in my hand - pinkish lavender -

Pinkish lavender jarring against
the red curtains, the red panels
of the hat around my ears - [xxxviii]

Then she leaves Otto, permanently:

And in my right hand I hold
a tiny white flower for Otto.
'Let me go.' I wrote to him -
'Let me be free.' And he will take
the white flower with its whitish stem -
almost ashen the way I painted it.
He will call it his little white rose
not knowing that it is a weed
mimicking jasmine -

He will call it his small snowdrop of petals
not knowing the petals are wild -
and the whiteness will remind him of moonlight.[xxxix]

After this white-out she seems to find some domestic colour-peace in the last self-portrait ('Self-Portrait with Two Flowers in the Left Hand') before her death:

I give you the colours of crockery.

I wear a sleepy blue:

blue of a ceramic milk jug -

Even the sky looks milky today.

Two flowers because
of the second heart
beating within me.[xl]

Reflection on the artist's own gaze is typical of modern practice - just as is self-reflexivity in literature. And *A Colour for Solitude* begins (in 'Self-Portrait as Aubade') with self-awareness:

The gaze in the mirror:

straightforward yet unconscious -
the self-assessment is open to the bone,
open to the soul -

Will the quest begin now?[xli]

It will, and with not just the green potential, but a striking and ironic (because she never did grow old) looking-forward:

...you have found her -
the older woman
who hides in your young face - [xlii]

Another description which makes one want to see the painting! As does the opposite self-questioning in 'Self-Portrait with Scratches', with its implication of multiple 'you's':

Why is this you
looking like a fourteen-year-old girl
after two years of marriage? [xliii]

Because, it is implied, Otto took no sexual interest in his bride, not consummating the marriage for some years.

There is a kind of 'battle of the gaze' between Paula and Clara just after Rilke has left Clara (1905) which brings with it some of the tension implicit in their both having been attracted to him. Paula says:

when you sit like this

remembering Rodin -

I can look at you fully,
deeply - without you observing me -
I need you to look away from me.
I need to watch you,
to grasp you

without your gaze
interrupting mine - without your gaze
blocking mine - [xliv]

Clara's version is that:

> I clenched my teeth
> as you scrutinized me,
> as your eyes scoured
> over me -
>
> But in the end you retrieved me
>
> from my abyss. [xlv]

Paula's portraits themselves are the gazers in the dramatic turnaround in which she imagines her possible love for Rilke. To start with:

> Nights I sleep with my paintings around me.
> But most of all, I keep
> your portrait in my mind, my dreams -

and then:

> How we loved each other
> those last days before
> each of us married the wrong beloved -
>
> And when we kissed
> this morning,
> watched by all the eyes
> in my paintings - [xlvi]

This is a neat way of animating the paintings, which is in part what the whole sequence aims to do. And it is in this context, too, that Paula asks Rilke for 'a better colour for solitude'. Another uncomfortable gaze appears towards the end of the sequence in 'Was it the Blue Irises?', voiced directly for the poet:

> The way I returned again and again to your self-portrait with blue irises
>
> made the guards uneasy....

The look that passed between us must have lasted
a long time because I could smell the light
from the irises falling across your face...

When I finally left you I noticed three guards following me.

By the time I got home I was furious at them
for witnessing all this.[xlvii]

All in all, then, there's a whole lot of gazing going on: Paula looks at, in order to paint, herself. Her later selves look at her earlier selves through the portraits. The portraits seem to look back at her, and at the others in her life. Bhatt looks at the portraits and imagines how Paula was, and how she looked at them. The guards look at Bhatt looking at the portrait, and she at them. We, as readers, 'look' through the poem's descriptions, at all of this. Within all this is the look as transforming and defining - and also acting as the voyeur at the soap opera aspect of any life. There is, for example, the revelation which one could imagine appearing in a tabloid exposé:

How shall I say it?
That in the fifth year of my marriage
I am still untouched - a virgin -
still Paula Becker - Otto has not
made me his wife. [xlviii]

In this context, this echoes and yet undermines the defining/objectifying role of the male artist with regard to the female model, and traditional power relationship that brings with it - and it is that male gaze which is notably absent from the book, as neither Otto nor Rilke speaks.

That in turn links to the issue, as opposed to the male gaze's attempted definition, of self-transformation. Take 'Self-Portrait with Red Chalk':

You are Italian now -

Renaissance sadness

in your eyes - seriousness
of the very young.[xlix]

This may describe how she looked, but is also surely in part a play on the conceit that the manner of representation can change how one looks (or at least how one is perceived: history has vindicated

Picasso's claim that Gertrude Stein would come to look like his portrait of her, at least in my case, as the only image I can associate with Stein is indeed Picasso's portrait). This theme is stated more directly in 'Self-Portrait with Blossoming Trees':

> And if I paint myself serene
> will I become
> serene - at one with these
> blossoming trees? [l]

This then seems to be realised, in a sense, in a painting shortly afterwards:

> A strand of my hair
> joins the trunk of a tree. [li]

From this querying she moves to wishing it so:

> You have just eaten strawberries -
> wild ones that were small
> but sweet. You have found
> a lover, you have found love -
> but no-one believes you.[lii]

And to assertion - sounding confident, but pointing up her difficulties in reality:

> A brush stroke
> and I can decide my fate.[liii]

Other examples include the power of art to transform, here through an openness to the influence of French modes (which follows on from another use of colour):

> Let the scarlet grow sharper
> against the white beads -
>
> This mouth is preparing itself
> to speak French forever - [liv]

and the thought - relatively early in the sequence - of daring to be different in a way which Paula does later take up in her self-portraits:

> Shall I undo this bow,
> shall I
> step out of my clothes? [lv]

One of the most radical transformational proposals is that Paula become a stone, implying, perhaps, the success of the elimination of emotions which the description of the painting just preceding appears to suggest:

> A brush stroke
> and my face disappears -
> and so do my nipples
>
> What is this desire
> to become featureless -
> to become a menhir? [lvi]

And towards the end of her life the idea of ethnic make-up (and perhaps historical period) returns, exotisizing Paula:

> I am Egyptian now -
> darker than the sun can ever
> make me [lvii]

These three themes work to help bind together both the collection and the continuity of Paula's life. And one could certainly pick out others, such as sexual norms, physical vs mental, language vs image, and a movement towards clarity which sounds as if it may be reflected in the paintings. To what extent do they describe themes which are already present in the pictures, or are brought in by Bhatt's organisation?

Poems and Paintings Together

I visited Bremen in early March 2003 to reconsider the poems in the context of the paintings and the landscape of Worpswede, and to interview Sujata Bhatt.

Paula's paintings are largely concentrated in galleries there and in the nearby artists' colony of Worpswede. I was able to see ten of the 35 paintings fully described in the poems, plus several referred to less fully by the poems, and to see reproductions of a further ten. I also obtained material on Paula's life. After reading that, I spoke to Sujata about the book (see interview in Appendix 1).

One surprise to me was what is almost the cult of Paula in that part of Germany. My knowledge of C20 art is reasonable, yet my awareness of Paula's work was minimal - largely, I think, because hardly any of her paintings are in Britain. Perhaps her high profile in Germany is not so surprising: her life, with its marital difficulties, connections with fame and tragically early end is the stuff of romantic stereotypes - if there can be films about Sylvia Plath, Frida Khalo and Virginia Woolf, as there have recently been, then why not, I found myself thinking, about Paula Modersohn-Becker? Consistent with that high profile - and somewhat to my relief - I also found her paintings to be strong and distinctive, especially the self-portraits.

On the other hand, despite remarkable productivity, it did feel as if Paula was experimenting constantly, and moving forwards and backwards between styles in an artistic career which after all was less than ten years, and could be seen as a beginning only. One question I felt I could answer fairly easily was whether there is a movement towards clarity in the work: there is not. And I did find some of the comparisons - eg Brigette Uhde-Stahl's [lviii] bracketing of Paula as 'on a par' with Cezanne, Gaugin (her most prominent influence, I think) and van Gogh as the four key forerunners of modernism, decidedly exaggerated.

So, I went to Bremen triply ignorant: of Paula's paintings, of her life, and of the landscape which inspired her. I soon came to see that a triple selectivity lay behind the poems: of which genre of Paula's paintings to focus on (e.g. self-portraits but not portraits); of which paintings to focus on within a given genre; and of which features to write about within a given painting. Thus, quite apart from the questions of which voices to use and which narrative strategies to adopt, the sequence could have been very different. The interview picks up several of the choices which Bhatt made and explores her reasons for them.

Did I like the poems better for losing my three areas of ignorance? Undoubtedly it was seeing the paintings which made the biggest difference. And Bhatt had herself found it difficult to decide whether she wanted to make sure the reader did see at least reproductions of the paintings - though,

for me, Paula certainly turned out to be a painter whose work gains a lot from its actual, as opposed to reproduced, presence. Originally she had planned an illustrated book, but then, according to Bhatt:

> I started to worry that the poems could become too dependent on the paintings, and get weakened in consequence. I decided I wanted the poems to stand on their own.

We are back here to the ekphrastic debate about whether the verbal representation can do without the visual, or indeed, prove superior to it. My conclusion, however, was that the poems certainly do gain from being given the visual context. To some extent that is a simple matter of the quality of the paintings - had they not interested me as paintings, I might indeed have been better off imagining them through the poems rather than seeing them. Equally, had the poems not pointed up aspects of the paintings in an interesting way, one might have preferred to see the paintings without them. On the contrary, I found there was a mutual enrichment between poems and paintings

The poems typically add biographical context - especially useful for a self-portrait; pick up on the mood of the painting, for me rather convincingly even though this is typically speculative; and highlight through description certain details which one might not otherwise notice. In addition, Bhatt often adds to what the painting shows by the technique, already explored in earlier chapters, of imagining what lies beyond it. I found that, far from distracting me when in front of the paintings, such additions expanded my view of the paintings' world in a stimulating way.

All these features are present, for example, in 'Self-Portrait with Coppery Red Hair': the poem dramatises the painting convincingly, describes the skin (or, rather deliberately, the paint that stands for the skin) with a detail which makes one look more carefully at the painting, speculates on why she looks as she does ('Something made you / turn around and look up'), uses the comparison with a bird of prey to catch the sharp look Paula has here, and suggests her state of mind ('not at all apologetic / for your hunger, your need - ').

Thus, the descriptions in the poems were themselves animated by the precision with which I could then see that they operated. Indeed, some descriptions seemed very pointed and convincing in front of the painting, but had seemed somewhat arbitrary and hard to imagine beforehand - they had either confused me, or just wanted to make me see the painting. For example, I picked up before my visit to Bremen on the self-transformations in the self-portraits. That made sense in theory, but in practice it was very hard to make anything much in my imagination of Paula being described as appearing of different ethnic origin or historical time (Italian, Ancient Pompeian, Indian, French, Egyptian) or of apparently differing ages (the old face in the younger and the younger face in the older) until I saw the pictures. It was also interesting to get Bhatt's own perspective on these

paintings, which tends to be closely related to Paula's biography, eg of the apparently differing ages she says:

> The earlier painting is an odd one, though given her early death it becomes all the more haunting, but the second could be explained sub-consciously by her being unhappy after the first year of marriage to Otto. As he was 11 years older than her, he might well have seemed more like a father to her, so leading her to picture herself as young enough to be his daughter.

Likewise many individual phrases such as 'a strand of my hair / joins the trunk of a tree' [lix] or 'a secret that is sliver grey' [lx] or 'She is the foreground / and the background' [lxi] seemed, when in front of the relevant painting, to be strikingly right, as well as appropriate to the way Paula's self-searching tale unfolds. Looking back at those poems now, I still feel that these are weaknesses in them as poems in isolation from seeing the paintings.

And there are still poems for which I haven't seen the paintings for which I find that the main effect of some descriptions is not to conjure up an image, but to make me want to see the picture. For example 'Self-Portrait as My Sister' (already an intriguing title) says that 'the wind tears all shapes / into a blur of colour' - one can guess at what that might look like, but the description mainly makes me want to see the painting. This is also true of 'The Washing on the Line' - a psychological portrait through that mundane subject - and the psychological colour-drama of 'Self-Portrait with Yellowish-Green'.

On the other hand, I didn't find the poems became otiose, over-straightforward descriptions of the obvious when read in front of the paintings. This was mainly, I think, because even the more straightforward descriptions became psychologically charged by the poems.

I am not supposing that reproductions will have all of the impact of the original paintings as accompaniments to the poems. Even so, I was pleased to find that Bhatt is contemplating issuing an illustrated version of the poems.

Nonetheless, that would change the dynamic of the book, and I can see that it is a legitimate fear that the poems would become subservient to the paintings whereas at present they are certainly in control of the unseen paintings. That might apply especially to the colour descriptions: before seeing the paintings I speculated as to the extent of selectivity and manipulation of colour by the poems in order to create the thought-through-seeming patterns of colour. In fact, as the interview

confirms, the colours are one of the most faithfully described components of the paintings (there is probably less poetic licence about them than about anything else), and Bhatt simply described them as they were, as she straightforwardly states. I had thought that there might have been a symbolic colour scheme imposed by Bhatt, but if there is such a pattern then it is there already in the paintings (and perhaps only through Paula's sub-conscious). That would become more apparent in a book of reproductions, and the colour descriptions could then seem somewhat redundant. But as Bhatt says:

> I was not consciously aware of this until you pointed it out in the analysis which you sent me. It may be that Paula herself had a set of associations between colours and emotions and that these therefore came into the paintings. I simply picked up on them - all the poems are written quickly without being sure whether they would come together as a coherent whole - although I felt that having written them, they did.

Chapter 4: The Challenge of Abstraction

Abstract paintings offer a somewhat different set of issues. As they represent - in theory - nothing but themselves, there is no extra removal from reality compared, for example, to a poem about a cat. And just as if one had never seen a cat, poems about cats would make little sense, if one has not seen at least the type of painting being written about the same is likely of at least those abstractions - abstract expressionist works, for example - which rely on painterly rather than, or as at least as well as, conceptual means. I concluded that it was, on balance, helpful to Sujata Bhatt's poems to see Paula Modersohn-Becker's paintings. It is more like necessary to have seen a Rothko if you are to engage with a poem about Rothko. That said, any Rothko will help, whereas the 'wrong' Modersohn-Becker would have been less helpful.

One way of writing about abstract works is, in effect, to pretend that they are not abstract (or not meant to be abstract) and to write about what they appear to represent. Moniza Alvi takes an entertaining approach to this by taking on the character of a dot in a painting [lxii] by Miro:

I'd survey the beauty of the linescape
and wonder - would it be worthwhile
to roll myself towards the lemon stripe

centrally poised, and push my curves
against its edge, to get myself
a little extra attention?

This could be just a bit of whimsy, but Alvi neatly turns this into a contrast of static and dynamic factors in painting and a meditation on the nature of freedom: would the dot trade off the stability and certainty of the painting (playing on its stillness, against which the dot's liveliness is enacted), which it likes being in, for the risky possibility of improvement in - by implication - the real world?

And how important is improvement, anyway, if imperfection can be more interesting?

But it's fine where I am.
I'll never make out what's going on
Around me, and that's the joy of it.

The fact that I'm not a perfect circle
Makes me more interesting in this world.

The dot seems to come down in favour of the status quo, in which 'nothing in this tawny sky / can get too close, or move too far away'.

One factor this shares with Larkin's use of Flemish genre painting, I think, is that it wouldn't much matter whether you had seen the specific Miro painting, so long as you had seen one of them of this type. I suspect that may be generally true of writing about abstract works. Certainly it hold for Charles Tomlinson's very effective consideration[lxiii] in 'Netherlands' of Mondrian (in general, I think, rather than a particular painting) as representative of landscape. The whole poem reads:

The train is taking us through a Mondriaan[lxiv] -
The one he failed to paint. Cows
Keep moving along the lines
Of dyke and drain, the glinting parallels
And the right-angles of a land hand-made.
True: curvature is no feature of this view,
Yet why did the sky never cause him to digress
With its mile-high cloud maintains
Pillowed and piled over hill-lessness?

Flying between the two, go heron and gull
Hunters, haunters of every channel.
There are no verges unplanted, no acres spare:
Water continues accompanying our track,
Cows graze up to the factory windows and we are there.

Mondrian derived his abstractions from landscape, and here Tomlinson returns them to it. He also suggests some connection between the flatness (with 'hill-lessness' emphasising the absence of curves rather than the positive flatness) of Dutch landscapes and Mondrian's avoidance of curves or diagonals in his mature work in favour of vertical and horizontal lines only. This is a gentle subversion of Mondrian, as he attributed that constraint to theosophical thought whereas Tomlinson suggests it could really be due, subconsciously, to the influence of landscape. But there is a qualification built into this: Tomlinson holds that the sky hasn't influenced Mondrian in the same

way, yet shouldn't it have? The artist has, through his selection, imposed himself on the landscape after all.

So how does this poem use the abstract image? Actually by denying it (this is a view Mondrian 'failed to paint'), yet showing how the landscape is like it - reversing the commoner procedure of trying to see what a painting represents to consider, if you will, what a realistic view un-represents. It's a neat trick, and an original poetic strategy.

Jamie McKendrick's poem on Joseph Albers [lxv] takes another direction which doesn't really use the abstract nature of the work to 'speak out' from, ie he turns to the painter's life. But he concludes by using the look of a typical Albers[lxvi] both as a way of seeing the ordering of his new life in America and also providing an interesting way of looking at those paintings as being about the control and cutting off of the past:

> ..... the future was square,
> an endless choir and afterlife of squares
> in razor-contoured oil on Masonite.

This, for me, lifts it above the - nonetheless attractive - biographical anecdotes to make it a very resonant meditation on the extent to which we can escape from the past (see page xx).

Abstract paintings often seek to create a mood in the viewer, and picking up on that mood is a plausible poetic strategy. Certainly Mark Rothko saw himself as a spiritual painter, and seems to have appealed to poets on that basis and perhaps also because, while one couldn't quite say that if one has seen one mature Rothko one has seen them all, one can say that if one has seen one then one is likely to pick up the general idea and the poet can start from that basis. Added to that, there is something poetic about Rothko's blurred bleedings (perhaps more so than there is about, say, the harder-edged abstraction of the minimalists), to which his suicide adds drama and apparent confirmation. Look, for example, at what Rothko himself listed (perhaps slightly self-mockingly) as the 'ingredients' for his 'recipe' of art:

> A clear preoccupation with death... sensuality, the basis for being concrete about the world...tension: conflict or desire in which art is curbed at the very moment it occurs...
> a few grams of the ephemeral... about 10% of hope... [lxvii]

In fact, there are at least four poems by well-known poets which take as at least part of their subject the same installation of maroon and black Rothkos in the Tate.

Peter Redgrove's poems normally work through a kind of fermenting of dreamscapes, so it's little surprise that Rothko suits him and leads, I think, to one of his best poems. 'Into the Rothko Installation' has a clear strategy, which is to use descriptions of smell to describe the emotional impact of the paintings (some kind of variant of synasthesia) as a parallel movement to how words describe the visual. For example the people 'sniff up the odours of the colours' and:

> ...red on red beating to the point
>
> where the eye gasps, and gives up its perfume
> like a night-flowering plant

It's a bold move as Rothko's paintings don't in fact smell, but a successful leap, I think. Redgrove adds to that the sense in late Rothko of darkness covering light (refracted through his suicide, which is also picked up together with blood, naturally enough in a red work); of the self finding itself in the depths of what remains a portrait format; and also finds a striking visual equivalent for the look of Rothkos:

> which are the after-images of a door slammed
> so blinding-white the artist must shut his eyes
> and paint the colours floating in his darkness.

And (perhaps overdoing it a shade):

> ...she saw that spirit-brightness
> of a door slammed open....
> ...like Venusberg
>
> opening white portals in the green mountain
> stuffed with light, he having used
> the darkest of all that spectrum almost to blindness

Venusberg being 'the court of Venus or any environment characterised by sensual pleasure'(OED), which fits well enough with Rothko's 'ingredients'. From this Redgrove is able to move seamlessly to Rothko's life:

> And in his studio in the thin chalk of dawn
> having passed inwardly through that blackness,
> slitting his wrists, by process of red on red
> he entered the chapel under the haunted mound
> where the lightning of another world
> flashed, and built pillars

Vision, scent and trauma can then be synthesised: 'We left / the gallery of pictures rocked / By the perfume of a slammed eye'. It seems to me that this is successful because Redgrove's rather fuzzy mysticism, which I can certainly find irritating and over-insistent, chimes so closely with the intent and the look of a Rothko.

I suspect Gillian Clarke's 'The Rothko Room' was not so much attempting to follow Redgrove but written in parallel to it. Her mood is close to Redgrove's, and both poets contrast Rothko with the Turner through which one could reach his work before the Rothkos were moved to Tate Modern. Clarke uses, neatly enough, the pun which it feels as if Redgrove was avoiding by not using the colour-word 'maroon' ('The Indian keeper nods to sleep, marooned / in a trapezium of black on red.'). And in Clarke the paintings trigger visual cues:

> Rack the heart for memory or sense
> and reds like these come crowding out of dream:
> musk mallow, goat's rue, impatiens,
> loosestrife, hellebore, belladonna, nightshade,
> poppysilks crushed in their velvety soot,
> and digitalis purpurea, red on maroon.

Here it is interesting to ask what is describing what: the richness of Rothko's reds is emphasised by how many other reds they call up, but I suspect the average reader may be more familiar with Rothko than loosestrife or goat's rue, so the concrete ends up being described as like the abstract rather than vice versa! These associations are attractive enough, but they don't have the bite or the appropriateness to Rothko that Redgrove achieves. That said, they do play neatly against the next

poem in the collection, 'Red Poppy', which is taken from a painting by Georgia O'Keefe and has a 'heart of charcoal' which picks up the black in the red of Rothko.

Robin Robertson's set of four poems 'Maroon, Over Black On Red' (see page xx) takes a more biographical approach. Each short poem is a glance at Rothko the man through the ingenious unifying device of an echo of the characteristic look of his mature paintings. This is done both through colours (linked to blood) and shapes, the latter by utilising the characteristic door-shape of Rothko's work and linking that with exits in each poem - either windows or doors appear in all four. The first poem introduces blood through an incident at an opening in which Rothko puts his hand through plate glass: 'an after-image of the black grave, / forecast in red'.

The second picks up Redgrove's image of 'the slammed door' and also the after-image from the first poem:

> This is the light
>
> through closed eyes:
>
> the dark corona
>
> fraying the edges
>
> of the slammed door

The third ('Art Lesson') works through the creation of the idea of one of his paintings in a separate form by a woman whom I take to be Rothko's wife in the late sixties, when they were rowing constantly and she was sliding into alcoholism:

> She stood at his
> burnt windows
> until she saw herself
> answered in their dark,
> the way glass gets
> blacked at night
> in a lighted room.
> She went home,
> pulled the curtains,
> drew a red bath.

'Exit' then picks up Rothko's own death: a messy suicide by slashing his arms:

black on red; unframed.
Signed by the artist
in the crook of his arm.

What is attractive about these poems is how they go beyond the straightforwardly autobiographical by utilising the qualities of the paintings themselves in setting out their vignettes, while at the same time tracing through the themes of doors, exits and blood. Given how pared down each of the four poems is, this is an impressive achievement.

John Taggart takes a more performative approach. His 'Slow Song for Mark Rothko' sets out I think to re-enact the experience of becoming lost in a Rothko painting. It does so suitably slowly - perhaps excessively slowly at nearly a hundred lines - and using repetition and hesitation to incantatory effect:

To breathe and stretch one's arms again.
to breathe through the mouth to breathe to
breathe through the mouth to utter in
the most quiet way not to whisper not to whisper
to breathe through the mouth in the most quiet way to
breathe to sing to breathe to sing to breathe
to sing the most quiet way.

It seems right for Rothko, although without the title it would be hard to identify which semi-mystical experience was being described.

Taking these four poems together, it seems Rothko proves fertile poetic territory due to the combination of a readily identified visual character and strong emotional content in both life and work, ie the poems are primarily about emotion, not appearance. And that approach is perfectly consistent with Rothko's own view of his art:

> I'm not an abstract artist...I'm not interested in the relationship of colour or form or anything else. I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions - tragedy, ecstasy, doom and so on.[lxviii]

I have myself written a poem on Rothko (see Appendix 2) which starts from the premise, in effect, that you live in the painting in the style of the dot in Alvi's version of Miro. That does end up being about emotions, which sounds like what Rothko himself might have hoped.

5: The Conceptual Turn in my Own Poems on Art

Art which is primarily conceptual rather than abstract raises a different set of issues: often the appearance of the work in terms of craft or skill can seem of secondary importance (hence, of course, the taunts of how 'anyone could do that' and questioning of whether it is, in fact, 'art'). That can make it easy enough to describe, the problem then being not just to go beyond the image, as poets tend to in responding to more traditional representational work, but to take the idea further or to twist it interestingly.

But what is 'conceptual art'? Tom Lubbock [lxix] makes a useful distinction between what has come almost to seem 'classic' conceptual art of the sixties, 'determinedly non-visual, and typically featuring black and white photos and typed texts' - the type of art which typically looked at the idea of art itself and its relation to language (e.g. Kosuth, Kawara, Huebler) - and the looser usage which calls much 'Young British Art' conceptual in order to make the distinction between:

(a) art that has an exploratory hands-on engagement with its physical materials... and

(b) art that proceeds by having an idea and then executing it [lxx]

Or, to put this a little more fully:

> Conceptual art is not about forms or materials, but about ideas and meanings. It cannot be defined in terms of any medium or style, but rather by the way it questions what art is...
>
> Because the work does not take a traditional form it demands a more active response from the viewer, indeed it could be argued that the Conceptual work of art only truly exists in the viewer's mental participation. [lxxi]

These distinctions, like so many, collapse to some extent in the face of the actual practice of the artists covered by it. No doubt Pollock had ideas before he engaged with the material, no doubt Emin is largely inspired by exploring her media. Much traditional art does benefit from the viewer's active participation. But these generalisations do point to two thoughts in terms of writing about much recent art.

First, if it is the idea which is primary, rather than the visual means or even the visual result, it may be that the essence can be conveyed more easily to those who have not seen the work by means of

verbal description. Indeed, along with the accusation that 'anyone could make that' may come the claim that 'there's no point in making it', ie the experience is no more interesting than the idea - or the idea's expression in words. Again, that shouldn't be true of a successful work, but it may be that proportionately less is lost in the description alone.

Second, the need for active participation could well suit a poem, which can enact or mimic that process - what are the thoughts which the spectator might have?

By this reasoning, conceptual art, broadly defined, would seem to be a promising area about which to write poems. But I seem to be pretty well alone in this practice. There's plenty to be written about Pollock, but none of it can expect to be much of a substitute for seeing the paintings, whereas to write about Kawara (as I have[lxxii]) is perhaps less likely to seem a poor substitute for the work itself. Kawara's practice consists of series of works obsessed with the passing of time. For example postcards and telegrams sent from around the world simply asserting 'I am alive', date paintings, which are monochromes showing the date on which they are painted, and books containing lists of dates - which may then be read as a performance. Kawara is said (he eschews interviews or photographs) to start a date painting every day, though he does not always finish it and in that case throws the canvas away.

The point of Kawara's realising, as opposed to merely describing, such works marking the passage of time is, I think, to heighten the impact of the idea through the surprising seriousness and rigour with which it has been seen through. Kawara has been making his date paintings for thirty years so far. They are also according to Wall[lxxiii] a play on the relationship between abstraction (the background being the 'classic' monochrome) and representations of modern life (the date); and according to Batchelor[lxxiv] a play on repetition:

> To repeat the date is, obviously enough, a paradoxical form of repetition, as the date is never the same twice. But this paradox doesn't disrupt the system because it doesn't get us inside the work. To repeat the action of painting the date is a rather different matter though. This is where contingencies and irregularities begin to creep into the system and break its will towards regularity.

So there are several lines one could explore from these visually simple works. My Kawara poem 'One Million Years' does not make much of the rigour of the repetitive process, but uses the work as a jumping-off point for conceptual play on the nature of time evoked as opposed to time actually passed, and on the difference between subjective and objective perspectives on time. It read in full:

So this is what a million years look like:
ten thick volumes with five hundred listed per page.
And how they sound,
as read with some deliberation
by an alternating team of two -
trained, I don't doubt, the length of their lives.
970,744 BC.
They've only just started. For a moment
I resolve to see it through
like an old-fashioned marriage
or War and Peace
to see how pleased I am with my endurance.
But can I bear to hear my own years
pass so plainly?
After just a decade, I move on.

Here comparisons are possible with poems I have written on two other art works concerned with the obsessive and with the monochrome. The first (see App 2), based on Opulka's closely-related practice, again focuses on paradox - unsurpisingly, as much conceptual art does concern itself with paradox:

You can feel the figures
ticking away to the ultimate
white. This isn't art,
it's the waste of a life
which would indeed be wasted
were the waste of it not art.

As in Kawara's work, this is as much performance as painting. The second is based on Rauschenberg's erasure, with de Kooning's collusion, of a heavily-worked de Kooning drawing.

David Batchelor[lxxv] summarises this work as 'really a story of the not quite circular passage between two monochromes: the blank piece of paper which came before it and the blank piece of paper which it became' - a summary which would fit the Opulka equally well, though I take it that the Opulka is more about life as the passage between two monochromes. My Rauschenberg poem

'Erased de Kooning Drawing' plays on how it is that largely invisible[lxxvi] palimpsest history which makes this what it is, and how that brings with it some paradoxical (if arguably dubious) value:

> Rauschenberg says that,
> to end up with anti-art,
> he had to start off with art.
> Which is why he sought to rub out
> what even then was a valuable
> de Kooning. And Bill himself, enjoying this,
> powered his way through several portfolios
> to track down the most heavily-worked
> of his drawings: firm pencil, smeared charcoal
> and plenty of awkward crayon. It took a good month
> to accord this the abundancy of vigorous respect
> demanded to destroy it. I say 'destroy':
> I wonder if it's worth more now
> than had it remained a de Kooning?

I see these 'art poems' as part poem, part diary, part review, part poems about something else entirely which just happen to start from the art work. In keeping with that, I have published some in an art magazine (*Modern Painters*) rather than submitting them to poetry magazines. I don't use much in the way of form (in contrast to much of the rest of my poetry), partly because they are rapid notes, partly because that could distract from the artwork, unless it mirrored it in some way, which, *pace* William Carlos Williams, is sometimes but rarely feasible (my poem on Warhol's '210 Coca-Cola Bottles', for example[lxxvii], uses 30 lines with seven words per line to reflect the picture's 7 x 30 line-up of bottles). In a way they are sketches in words, written (or at least started) in front of a work as a way of enhancing my own examination of it, the same way as making a sketch traditionally operates in front of an old master picture.

To work best, it may be that what I'll call a 'conceptual chiming' should take place in such poems, which is I hope a little subtler than formal mimicry, ie that the poem should not just describe the concept in the art work, but pick up and use that conceptual approach in a way which takes it further (not that I worry that I don't generally achieve that - they are fairly casual poems).

For example, though it could be argued that Nan Goldin is not a conceptual artist (certainly her work is primarily emotional), there is I think a conceptual strand in the apparently casual 'snapshot aesthetic' of her photographs, which show scenes of her friends in a typically intimate style. The

question is: given that her photographs are taken for public exhibition, can she really escape from charges of voyeurism or exploitation by claiming that her photographs just show what she herself happens to be doing? That question calls attention to the role of the photographer and the position of the viewer in a manner typical of conceptual art. By acting explicitly as the viewer in the poem (see App 2), rather than simply considering the work with (admittedly only apparent) objectivity, it is possible to dramatise that issue. Goldin's photograph is of a couple, Valerie and Bruno, making love:

> she says that she's not a voyeur
> because she's part of what she photographs -
> if dancing I'll be dancing too,
> if sex then I'll be having sex -
> which makes this scene the prelude to a threesome.
> But wondering what form that took
> without the option of making it four
> makes my role even more voyeuristic,
> as if what Nan avoided just got shunted on to me.

If that works, then the question of Bruno and - especially - Valerie's roles in comparison with Nan's, mine and now the reader's as well, adds other ramifications. Conceptual chime, I hope.

The Opulka poem has some of that chiming too: is a life spent writing what will in due course be forgotten - even supposing it is noticed in the first place, of which the poem is another example, so is any poem really so different from the self-negation of the painting?

'Lie of the Land' (App 2) attempts to achieve 'conceptual chime', between the life and work of Ana Mendieta by using the works in which she emerges from under or leaves an impression on the landscape to simultaneously represent and contrast with the end to her (said to be) troubled relationship with her husband, Carl Andre. A poem about an Andre work comes next and in turn picks up the theme of what is on the ground - in Mendieta's case her dead body as she fell from the eighth floor in suspicious circumstances, though Andre was cleared of her murder. The manner of her death feels like an ironic reversal of her most famous work, both literally in its physical enactment and metaphorically if her work is taken to connect to the earth as a symbol of fertility, but is also oddly prefigured in her less well-known sequence of photographs of people reacting to blood on the pavement.

The Andre poem itself (App 2) deals - lightly enough - with another characteristic of conceptual art, ie its ability to provoke reactions of a different type from those to be expected of traditional art.

Many of Andre's sculptures are designed to be walked on - going beyond the modernist tendency to take sculpture 'down from the podium' and flatly on the floor to put it underfoot. This fits with conceptual art's undermining of traditional notions of value in art - but in a gallery context, the institution may prove a more powerful influence on visitors' behaviour than does the nature of the work, as the poem observes.

In my poem on Martin Creed (App 2) I twist one of his text works ('THE WHOLE WORLD + THE WORK = THE WHOLE WORLD) to form the poem's title. Creed is notorious for his 'lights going on and off' Turner prize installation, which does seem a rather thin joke in itself, but fits in with a concern in all of his work to avoid choices (eg between the lights being on or off) and to see how small an intervention he can make and still produce a 'work of art'. That 'formula' for making the work disappear (that the work *is* the text) captures both those concerns since it asserts how self-effacing it is and also threatens to disappear into the world.

In this context the attempted 'conceptual chime' lies in the mutual kiss as two halves of an avoidance of decision as to who makes the first move, reflecting in turn the two halves of air in Creed's balloon-filled room 'Work No. 2002: Half the Air in a Given Space' (App 2):

> Which half is
> meant may well be 50%
> of the point - that and
> how both halves will change
> due to pops and escapes.
> But now is the time
> to take in a partner,
> to smooch without worrying
> who's kissing whom
> in the maximum
> kiss-squeak of airs.

More often, the concept in the art works as a metaphor for parallel concepts elsewhere, ie the jumping off point is a conceptual spin in the same way as a representational picture may provide an image or possible story or an abstract painting an emotion from which the poet launches the poem.

Thus, for example, 'Suspended Animation' (see App 2 for this and the following five poems) uses the idea of editing out, 'Plan of Obsolescence' takes means of bisecting a life, 'Yearly Lamp' is

about maximising anticipation of and minimising the time taken by events, 'Futures' looks at fake events, 'Negative Marks' at negative rather than positive ways of presenting information, ie by reference to what is omitted, 'Drive By Drawing' at attempting to keep up with change.

I have also written a poem derived from a central characteristic of Rachel Whiteread's sculpture, ie a concern with the spaces around things. Originally this was an 'art poem' directly about her work (most of which follows the titling convention 'Untitled (x)', hence my title) as follows:

Untitled (Rachel Whiteread)

Not so much swimming
as making the water fit about me.
Not the perfume of the lilies
but the mould of as-yet-scentless air
surrounding the spread of the fragrance.
Not the doing of my job, but its impact
on the time I spend away from work.
Not that I loved her, but how my life
seems shaped for her still
now she's gone. Not what I think
of the spaces she casts
against books, under beds, around stairs
but how I respond having seen them.

Some of this survived directly into the version (see App 2) which 'escaped' to become what I regard as a mainstream poem. The idea of spaces around a life took on a life of its own from which the starting point of Whiteread's work seemed a distraction, and a third person narrative seemed the right way to catch the resulting mood. In that form it is called 'Not' and begins:

Not so much swimming as making the water fit about him.

Not so much making the water fit about him

as wishing it would go about it faster.

Not so much the coffee

when he gets to the office after the pool,

as her influence remaining

in his almost pushing the decaff button.

Much of that is close to the view of Whiteread, but bringing in relationships takes it in a different - though related - direction. That said, there is plenty about relationships in Whiteread's art, something which is exploited in Tamar Yoseloff's poem about Whiteread's best-known work - 'House' (forthcoming in *Barnard's Star*, Enitharmon 2004) - which cast the inside of a Victorian house in Tower Hamlets:

> The concrete fills the spaces between
> the walls and what they held—a child's cry,
> an argument, dulled. It hardens, cools.
>
> The house is peeled away like a skin:
> a fire protrudes from the shell of a room,
> the ghost of a fire gone out.
>
> A mausoleum to newspapers and spoons,
> deep pile carpets, nights consumed
> by the bluish glow of the TV,
>
> perched in a field, a grassed-over street
> where once other houses stood,
> gathering lives together.

This, I'd say, is a traditional ekphrastic account of a conceptual work: it effectively allows the house to speak out about the lives it once contained in a way which doesn't feel speculative (although it is), and feels as if it is about the particular house rather than using it as a jumping-off point as my 'Untitled (Rachel Whiteread)' does. And in so doing Yoseloff picks up on the sense of loss, certainly, but also the sense of community and lost community specifically which are stronger in 'House' than in, for example, Whiteread's bed, chair or staircase-related works. Yoseloff herself says she 'has always been fascinated by abandoned or ruined buildings - they make regular appearances in my poems, almost like characters. Perhaps because of their constantly changing existence, they offer a view to the past, often to a way of life that is no longer familiar' [lxxviii].

It is also a poem which is not wholly explicit about its subject and would make sense (in a mysterious way) to someone who doesn't know anything about Whiteread.

And to finish by going paradoxically backwards in time, my poem about de Chirico picks up on conceptual concerns in his work, for despite painting in a realistic manner, he shared cubist concerns with moving beyond traditional conceptions of space. It does so by deliberately employing the key ekphrastic strategies: lines 1-5 attempt to verbalise the visual in a way which is patently bound to fall short if you've never seen a de Chirico painting; lines 6-9 take the reader speculatively beyond the painting, in the manner which Sujata Bhatt uses to effect; line 10 uses the painting as a jumping-off point for a possible story, conflating the biographies of de Chirico and Ariadne [lxxix]; lines 11-12 allow Ariadne to speak - a literal form of ekphrasis - and to reveal that if the rest of the poem made little sense then maybe that's the point - though it is also possible (as it is in de Chirico's paintings) - that there are personal reasons for what is seen which do a give potential explanation for, if not necessarily make sense of, what is going on [lxxx]:

Typical de Chirico: arcades, distances,
train, train-smoke, two o'clock clock,
six o'clock shadow, multiple vanishing points
and Ariadne, statuesque, cast down
on the edge of her plinth.
Out of shot, a mannequin
threads a way back through the backstreets
and the artist's mother prepares once again
to move with her son's next posting.
Maybe the army will billet on Naxos.
Wake me, requests Ariadne,
should anything make any sense.

APPENDIX 1

Paintings and Poems in *A Colour for Solitude*: an interview with Sujata Bhatt,

Bremen, 3 March 2003.

PC-K: How did you come to write so much about Paula Modersohn-Becker's paintings?

SB: Having written a little about Paula beforehand, I used the idea of writing more about her paintings as a kind of assignment for myself once I had finished working on *The Stink of Garlic* in 1994. The combination of a previous interest in Paula and an empathy with both her life and work with moving in 1988 to live close to where she had lived made Paula a natural subject for me. This therefore felt like a good way of getting down to work when I wasn't sure in which direction I wished to move - poems about Paula began to come easily without any questioning of their validity. However, before I got very far I was distracted by the need to write the commissioned piece 'Hole in the Wind' and then got side-tracked, if you like, into the poems which came to form *Augotora*. Nonetheless, I kept my eye out for exhibitions about Paula and kept reading about her, attending lectures and so on. Then I came back to writing about Paula's paintings in the autumn of 2000.

PC-K: Was *A Colour for Solitude* designed to be read without knowledge of Paula's paintings?

SB: I changed my mind about this. At this stage, as I began in earnest, I had in mind the book which included both poems and reproductions of the paintings, but Michael Schmidt, my publisher in England, said that Carcanet could not do this - I would have to arrange for a publisher in Bremen to take on the artwork side. I was indeed able to make such arrangements, but by the time I had done so had changed my mind! I started to worry that the poems could become too dependent on the paintings, and get weakened in consequence. I decided I wanted the poems to stand on their own. Thus, most of the poems were written in the knowledge that they would have to survive without the reader seeing the painting which had inspired them.

PC-K: Would your ideal reader, nonetheless, be at all familiar with Paula's life or art?

SB: Essentially, no - it shouldn't be a problem not to know the pictures, or to know Paula's story. And the friends who gave me feedback on the draft poems - from England and America rather than from Bremen - did so without knowing Paula's work.

That said, I am certainly happy if reading the poems makes you curious to see the pictures. And I did two readings at the Paula Modersohn-Becker museum to an audience who were familiar with

her work, and the reaction was favourable. I was also nervous about showing the poems to Paula's grand-niece, who apart from her personal connection with Paula is a well-informed judge of painting and poetry who owns several of Paula's paintings - so I was really encouraged that she liked the book.

PC-K: How important is it to you that the poems accurately represent the paintings? Did you allow yourself poetic licence in this respect - either to alter details in the paintings or to add to them?

SB: I didn't want to just faithfully record the paintings, so there was lots in the poems which are not obviously in the paintings - especially emotions, atmosphere and weather - though I hope they seem to relate to what is in the pictures. There are also objects which are imagined and beyond what you can see.

PC-K: Such as the imagined flowers on page 73, the white flower's being for Otto on page 80, the birdsong on page 41 or the horse on page 39?

SB: Yes, or the forget-me-nots in 'Self-Portrait with a Wreath of Red Flowers in Your Hair'.

PC-K: Those are all additions to the paintings, but sometimes you actually change small details - for example the hair length on page 73, the 'shape given to fingers' on page 68 where individual fingers are not delineated, or stating on page 69 that one brushstroke makes the face disappear when it is actually several?

SB: Such differences are possible but not deliberate - it is rather that, without deliberately changing what is seen, I was intent mainly on recording the spirit of the paintings.

PC-K: Another thing you appear not to worry about is which is Paula's left hand and which her right, given that the self portraits will all have been painted via mirrors which reversed this. It is perhaps most striking on page 90 where Paula says she holds in 'My left hand because it has to be', whereas in fact she must be holding them in her right hand...

SB: Yes I was aware that this is inconsistent but it seemed reasonable to take the mirrors at 'face value' as it were.

PC-K: One interesting possible example of poetic licence, I think, is that in 'Self-Portrait with Scratches' it looks to me as if the end of the brush handle has been used to make the scratches, whereas you write of Paula using 'a sharp knife / to carve out the light'. That certainly sounds more dramatic and more in line with the tone of the poem and the state of mind being conveyed.

SB: Yes, it is perhaps likely that the brush handle was in fact used, but I was happy to think that it could also have been a knife and this would work better for the poem by adding some appropriate drama.

PC-K: Were the poems as a rule written in front of the images - either the original pictures or reproductions?

SB: Generally not in front of the original pictures, though I found myself going backwards and forward to see them. I did have reproductions to hand if I needed to consult them.

PC-K: How important do you consider the paintings in themselves to be in sequence? Are they primarily a device through which to tell the story and generate images, or do you want the reader to care about them as paintings?

SB: I do admire the work so the paintings are important as paintings as well as inspirations.

PC-K: Having seen little of Paula's work before - mainly, I suppose, because so little of it is in England - I am certainly impressed by it.

SB: That is a relief to me: I was a little afraid you might come all the way to Bremen and then not like her work! And actually I am considering having translations of the poems in German which could then be combined with a picture version. So I am still open to an illustrated version of the book...

PC-K: Are you aware of any similar painting-based sequences of poems? Or other poems about paintings which have inspired you?

SB: I'm not sure there is anything else of this length with a narrative approach, though I think Pascal Petit may be working on a set with similar intent about Frida Khalo (and I myself have written about Frida). I was aware of the tradition of poems about paintings, for example by Auden and William Carlos Williams, and I also enjoy Paul Durcan's poems about the paintings in the National Galleries of both Ireland and London - but none of those examples trace through a story between paintings, only within them.

PC-K: The use of colour in the poems seems to be very deliberately planned. To what extent did that simply emerge from how you naturally described the paintings?

SB: I was not consciously aware of this until you pointed it out in the analysis which you sent me. It may be that Paula herself had a set of associations between colours and emotions and that these therefore came into the paintings. I simply picked up on them - all the poems are written quickly without being sure whether they would come together as a coherent whole - although I felt that having written them, they did.

PC-K: You wrote almost all the poems after living in Bremen, Paula's home area, and coming to know the landscapes which she painted. How important was that?

SB: The proximity of her work and landscapes and the availability of her journals and letters was important - it helped me to identify with her. I also feel that I couldn't have written these poems when I was 25 because I needed a distance from the age at which Paula was when the poems were set, which is mostly between 25 and 30.

PC-K: Have you been strict in using the contents of the letters and journals, for example in those poems which are presented as being letters between the characters?

SB: As with additions to the paintings, I used what I could but was happy to make things up. That is especially true with Clara as her letters are still unavailable and she herself was quite a silent person.

PC-K: One interesting claim which you make, but which I have not seen in the biographical material I have read about Paula, is that during the first five years of their marriage she and Otto had no sexual relationship. Is this speculation?

SB: No, I took this from a detailed biography which has only been published in German. It was kept secret by Otto, but is now felt to be quite well-established, largely through testimony via of one of the children of Otto's third marriage. It is also thought that Clara told Rilke of this. It seemed that Otto did feel a strong physical attraction to Paula but was always afraid that pregnancy would be too much for her - as indeed it proved.

PC-K: It seems then that it was only after Otto and Clara had split up and then reunited in Paris in 1907 that they had a sexual relationship. Is it clear that Matilda *was* Otto's child?

SB: I think so, yes. The dates make this quite clear - for example Rilke had already left Paris at the time she was conceived.

PC-K: Talking about what you have and have not changed, I have found from comparison of the original paintings with ten poems, and so far as I can tell with a further ten for which I now have reproductions, that your description of the colours are always accurate.

SB: Yes, I saw no reason to change them. Rather, the colours were part of the starting point for the emotions which the paintings generate in the poems. I used them to pick up on possible moods.

PC-K: There are several voices in the book: apart from Paula herself through both letters and paintings there is Clara, the voice of the unknown narrator who addresses Paula, and also your own voice explicitly as a poet. But none of these voices come across as male. Did you consider giving, for example, Otto or Rilke a chance to speak? Otto in particular strikes me as a very sympathetic man.

SB: I didn't want Rilke to speak - he has already spoken a lot, and it would also be presumptuous to attempt to speak for such a poet! I agree that Otto is a sympathetic character. For example in how he helped Paula by giving her space when she needed and by sending her money even when she had announced that she was leaving him for good. However, I don't much like his painting - it doesn't develop and it doesn't seem to pick up on the concerns of the 20th century. So I don't think I was interested in him enough as an artist to want him to speak. My feeling of generosity was really towards Paula and I started from there and only moved out in so far as I felt I needed to in order to tell her story.

PC-K: The oldest poem which now appears in the book was written as long ago as 1979, and a number of other poems were published as separate clutches out of sequence in *PN Review*. In that light, how important is the sequencing to you? And how many poems had you written before it emerged?

SB: For the most part I wrote them out of order, but decided half way through that the right way to bring them together would be to give them the chronology of her life. I was a little surprised how naturally they then did come together in that way, though perhaps that reflects the natural trajectory of a life.

PC-K: You had various choices to make: not just in who to give voice to and what to use from the paintings you used, but also in which genres of painting to use. Paula was very prolific in her short life and you have chosen mostly self-portraits together with a few landscapes and pictures of children. That means you have made much less use of her portraits of others (for example of Otto, Clara, Rilke and Elspeth, the step-daughter to whom she seemed to be very close) and have not really used at all her paintings of peasant life, mother and child themes or still-lives. Why was that?

SB: It was the self-portraits which initially attracted me and simply following those through led to a long book - over 100 pages when the typical book of poems is probably 60 pages. Introducing other genres could have introduced too many different trajectories and made it hard for the reader to follow. Having said that, I have written poems about Paula which are not in the book - for example dealing with Elspeth - and I feel I could easily write more which would cover those other areas of her work. But perhaps it might then appear that I am a little obsessed!

PC-K: Two of the most striking paintings and poems are 'Self-Portrait with Coppery Red Hair' in which you say 'you have found her: / the older woman / who hides in your young face' and the later 'Self-Portrait with Scratches' in which in contrast you suggest that 'this is the face of a fourteen year old girl', and ask Paula 'Why have you taken it as yours? / For you are twenty-seven'. Those descriptions seem highly apposite to me. What do you think lies behind her contrasting appearances in these paintings?

SB: The earlier painting is an odd one, though given her early death it becomes all the more haunting, but the second could be explained sub-consciously by her being unhappy after the first year of marriage to Otto. As he was 11 years older than her, he might well have seemed more like a father to her, so leading her to picture herself as young enough to be his daughter.

PC-K: Something you didn't use was the alarming incident in which she and a cousin with whom she was playing were buried in sand at the age of ten and the cousin died while she escaped. Were you aware of that?

SB: Yes I was aware of the story, but it just didn't happen to fit - I didn't deliberately choose not to use it.

PC-K: It would have been easy to stop with Paula's death, but you then go on to consider her from posthumous perspectives. Was that a difficult decision?

SB: No, the poems just arose, eg the opportunity to speak to Paula's daughter had arisen when we happened to visit Venice in 1995, so it was natural to use that. Comments on the draft collection tended to like those poems, so there was no reason to omit them.

PC-K: And finally, if a little tangentially to the way you use paintings in the collection, is this your first book not to make direct use of your Indian background?

SB: Yes, although it is implied in 'Self-Portrait with a Lemon' that Paula presents herself as an Indian here, just as she is presented as Italian, ancient Pompeian and Egyptian elsewhere. So the Indian is not entirely excluded!

APPENDIX 2: SELECTED POEMS REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT

Note: I have not reproduced here poems which are reproduced in full in the text, nor have I reproduced very easily accessible and well-known poems (Auden, Larkin, Williams, Keats) nor very long poems (Tranter) or full books (Bhatt)

The Balcony: after Manet

We from the perfect composition,
a triangle, he at the apex;
soft, glutton's hands
smelling of sandalwood and Havanas.
though I gaze down at the street,
I know how his thumb and index finger
stroke each other, round and round,
oh, so slowly.
A woman's skin: a sheaf of banknotes.

I dig my fingers hard against my fan
to block the screaming.
I could gather up my skirts
and vault the rail;
or leap at him, plunge my nails
into those too easy going eyes.
But I sit here,
tame as this agapanthus in a pot,
central yet marginal.

My little sister with the holy look
falters on the threshold. Will she
step on to the balcony beside me,
her cachou breath warm on my cheek?
Or will she stay. Give him
that second's sweet complicity
for which he waits,
a faint flush rising,
stroking, stroking.

Carole Satyamurti

I Would Like To Be A Dot In A Painting By Miro

Barely distinguishable from other dots,
it's true, but quite uniquely placed.
And from my dark centre

I'd survey the beauty of the linescape
and wonder - would it be worthwhile
to roll myself towards the lemon stripe

centrally poised, and push my curves
against its edge, to get myself
a little extra attention?

But it's fine where I am.
I'll never make out what's going on
around me, and that's the joy of it.

The fact that I'm not a perfect circle
makes me more interesting in this world.
People will stare for ever -

Even the most unemotional get excited.
So here I am, on the edge of animation,
a dream, a dance, a fantastic construction,

A child's adventure.
And nothing in this tawny sky
can get too close, or move too far away.

Moniza Alvi

The Language of Bleeding

Pane was the first, I think, to cut herself
as art instead of angst -
as if, in a spirit of openness,
we could expect to see into her mind
through the gap made by a razor.
Or else as if her thoughts
(such as that wounds are shaped by love)
might flow as freely as the blood she's used
(with her eyelids down against the sight)
to sketch the memory of mountains:
menstrual, violent, fragile and falling away.

'Gina Pane' at the John Hansard Gallery,
Southampton: 27.11.01 - 19.1.02

Rat Race

Here you can pass from high-towered meetings
in a citadel of capital investment
to the self-defeating scrabble for attention
such attempted interactions tend to be
in the form of a brown cardboard box -
naked, apart from a recycling symbol -
which squeaks an unchairmanly
me! me! me! to all who approach
and on, in a blink of the market dipping,
to a quiet box and blanket in the street.

'Rat Race' in 'STUCK' by Jeremy Deadman
in the foyer of The Economist Tower,
London: 20.11.02 - 12.1.03.

Paul Carey-Kent

Joseph Albers - Black Mountain, 1933/4

'A colour has many faces, and 1 colour can be made to appear

as 2 different colours...'

Out walking in pastures new,
in the first months of exile, Anni Albers
by a shade the better linguist -
was teaching her husband English

when he asked her
what pasture meant
and she replied: das ist klar:
the opposite of future.

He has a mind not to graze on
that type of pasture
(his fields of stained, reticulated glass)
whilst the future was square,
an endless choir and afterlife of squares
in razor-contoured oil on Masonite.

Jamie McKendrick

Real Time

These more-than-life-sized films
of tasks as dull as washing up
have been slowed down. It takes
a pain-full-y e-lon-gat-ed time
to choose and slice a pear or
lift a cup of tea to the mouth.
Only there's a sudden blink,
a licking flame, a floorboard's creak.
That sloth must be the hard work
of the actors' attempts to mimic
slow-motion - in which, in spite of
and unaided by their fierce looks of
concentration, they don't quite succeed.
Quick as poss I scrib it down,
how well it caps the horr
and yet the wond of life pass by.

'Slow Life' by Gary Stevens at
Matt's Gallery, London: 15.1-2.3.03

Living in White, Orange and Yellow*

Goodbye cruel line!
I'm set to swim from this hereafter
purely through an inner sea of blur -
from coddish calm to lemon sole,
from haddock-smoke to milk-sauced
modulation - and only due to paddle back
if that's the way the rest of me prefers...

which won't be so until the time
the life I want to go with next
moves out beyond the flux of fish
and any lurking under-swimmers
keen to rise to definition,
and I decide to spare myself
even those tiny decisions of tint

and just drift. For who's to say,
in spite of that, I won't be granted
orange rights? And why, precisely,
should I care a shrimp-sized prawn
for the old guard's war against fudge?
Wherever it is you can't exactly map out yet,
you may presume that I'm already there.

* Mark Rothko, 1953

Paul Carey-Kent

4232328 to 4253355

He only paints with numbers,
but plenty of them:
twenty-one thousand here alone,
or seven times that
in constituent numerals,
presuming the title's correct -
and *I'm* not checking.
He counts toward infinity
in a grey which is mixed to 1% lighter
each time he enumerates a canvas's space:
thirty-five years
for a full hundred paintings.
You can feel the figures
ticking away to the ultimate
white. This isn't art,
it's the waste of a life
which would indeed be wasted
were the waste of it not art.

'1/100 Detail 4232328 - 4253355' by Roman Opulka
in 'Aspects/Positions: 50 Years of Art in Central Europe 1949-99'
Southampton/Portsmouth galleries: 21.11.00 - 13.1.01

Paul Carey-Kent

210 Coca-Cola Bottles

They're all there, yes: seven rows of
thirty. There again, if seeking the ultimate
in shallowness really is Warhol's big profundity
it's odd to see that, reading them
from left to right and top to
bottom, only the 36th bottle is empty -
most of the rest being fully full,
with 23 in intermediate states, including number
155, which is full at the top
and empty at the bottom. I start
to wonder what's inside his soup cans.
Yet possibly Warhol himself would have said
(did say, in a manner of speaking,
through those to whom he delegated thinking)
that this celebrates the democracy of how
the super-rich can purchase only the self-same
bottles of coke as the poorest hobo.
Unless, of course, they bid for Andy's:

$10,000 each I'd guess. And extra meanings
are easy to run off from figures:
23 is the fewest celebrities Warhol needed
for two to be likely to share
a birthday. His own was Mata Hari's,
so how come he never painted her?
155 miles per hour's the maximum speed
of a human body in free fall.
36 must have been Marilyn's bra size.
And 210 is how many words - counting
the numbers, as you'll have worked out -
it takes to say this about bottles.

Paul Carey-Kent

Bruno Coming

What interests me here isn't Bruno's expression -
how else is he going to look when he comes? -
but Valerie's rapt and rapturous empathy
as her riding him reaches that point.
That and how Nan herself fits in:

she says that she's not a voyeur
because she's part of what she photographs -
if dancing I'll be dancing too,
if sex then I'll be having sex -
which makes this scene the prelude to a threesome.
But wondering what form that took
without the option of making it four
makes my role even more voyeuristic,
as if what Nan avoided just got shunted on to me.

'Bruno coming, Paris 2001' (in a sequence of photographs of Bruno and Valerie making love) in Nan Goldin's 'Devil's Playground' at the Whitechapel Gallery, London: 26.1 - 31.3.02

Paul Carey-Kent

Lie of the Land

First she is buried in flowers.
Then her outline is pressed on
the landscape - like a lover you've
lost but can't let go. Next
she emerges in grainy video transfer
with a human quake from under
piled rocks - like a passion suppressed
that won't stay down. Or hides
beneath turf and makes it breathe.
She died the time she made her shape
from eight floors up
and eight floors down,
her husband's role not clear.
And the book in the shop includes the series
'People Looking at Blood'. Passers-by react -
or don't - to evidence, apparently, of
violence on the pavement. None looks
too likely to call the police.

Ana Mendieta's work in the group exhibition
'Lie of the Land', Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol: 1.4 - 29.5.00

Paul Carey-Kent

Magnesium Square

What's best about an Andre floor piece
is sauntering across the thing
as if I hadn't spotted it
to observe how less frequent gallery-goers -
who seem to be in galleries
more and more often these days -
look alarmed, look away, look around
for an attendant to put me down
as a complete non-gallery-goer
(though why would I be here, if so?)
who doesn't even realise
that those metal squares *are*
the so-called work of art:
then the attendant yawns again
and they gingerly, smilingly, follow me on.

Tate Modern, London: June 2001

Paul Carey-Kent

This Poem Plus All Of My Poems Equals All Of My Poems

There isn't much to see here but
an atmosphere of minimalism -
crumpled paper on a plinth, notices
that constitute the indicated work -
until a room containing *Half*
the air in a given space.
In fact, the room is full of air,
but half in balloons you have
to fight your way beneath,
half not. Which half is
meant may well be 50%
of the point - that and
how both halves will change
due to pops and escapes.
But now is the time
to take in a partner,
to smooch without worrying
who's kissing whom
in the maximum
kiss-squeak of airs.

'Martin Creed: Works',
Southampton City Art Gallery: 14.1 - 16.3.00

Paul Carey-Kent

Suspended Animation

The feet of the man appear to twitch,
the arms to flap more markedly
as he holds himself up with just the air
above the trampoline. The downs and ups,
the blurb explains, have been edited out.
The outcome's a jerky levitation
which makes me think of the gaps you don't see
in cartoons. But could we apply this trick to life?
Could we lose the foibles and fol-de-rols,
the arguments and compromises,
the times when we get bounced
to float on the lilo of smooth content?
I almost said 'lose the human' there,
but I know that I shouldn't say that.

'Untitled (Trampoline)', video by Zeyad Dajani
in 'Presentness is Grace: Experiencing the Suspended Moment'
at the Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol: 1.12.01 - 10.2.02

Paul Carey-Kent

Yearly Lamp

The catalogue claims this bulb's been set
to shine for just eleven seconds
every year. And even if, as I suspect,
it never shines - like waiting
for Father Christmas to come -
there's a theory of excitement here
with the prospect of anticipation
beyond any tenable patience.
Birthdays, by comparison, so dominate
the calendar that Boetti, I guess,
would cut them back to birthpoints
the length of a baby's entering cry -
as well as keeping sex down
to an annual matter
comprising of a dozen strokes at most.

Alighiero Boetti: 'Lampada Annuale' in
'Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962-1972'
at Tate Modern, London: 31.6 - 19.8.01

Paul Carey-Kent

Futures

This is performance art made easy
with the photographs to prove it:
glasses with tear ducts, worn
for a year to gauge reactions;
the sunburned private areas you'd expect
from a negative bikini; the binbag
she hid in till the dustmen
came to take them both away...
If all you need's a fiddled photo
and a deadpan pseudo-documentary text
I just might have a crack:

visiting every gym in the country
as a gorilla; qualifying for Wimbledon
and serving only double faults.
I'm not too sure I'll bother
with a camera, come to that. I may
not even bother with a text.

Photographs by Hayley Newman
in the group show 'Becks Futures',
ICA, London: 17.3-14.5.00

Paul Carey-Kent

Negative Marks

This is the art of how did he do that? -
though you may need the clue
that it's not as you'd think.
What look like spontaneous gestures with chalk -
a loop, a tick, a cross or kiss -
are in fact the residual places
where the paper's left bare
by the tiny-brushed edge-up
of a background which turns out to be
the foreground after all. As if a menu
tempted you with what could not be served.
As if obituary columns were dense with survivors,
leaving who had died to be deduced.
As if the notices in parks - and I hope
they'd be longer than those we have now -
set out the things you *could* do on the grass.

Jonathan Parsons in 'Drawing'
at the Percy Miller Gallery, London, 28.7 - 2.10.00

Paul Carey-Kent

Drive By Drawing

Ought we to be holding this -
the struggle of a blue felt tip
to outline what's seen
through a moving car window -
up against the classic film
of Jackson spattering a pane of glass,
us and the camera underneath,
to demonstrate his method?
We start well enough tracing roof onto roof
but the roof's over trees in a second
which are flats before a single trunk's defined
then different trees then different flats
and soon the window's Pollock-dense
with doomed attempts to keep up.
You know how it is: you flail at the present
and find you've got hold of the past -
Stravinsky sounds modern enough to me,
my pop music ends with the new romantics,
who knows whether flares are in
and still it's hard to understand
how video escaped from the home...

'A Letter to an Unknown Person, No 6', video installation by

Rachel Lowe in 'The British Art Show 5', Southampton: 23.6-20.8.00

Paul Carey-Kent

Not

Not so much swimming
  as making the water fit about him.
Not so much making the water fit about him
  as wishing it would go about it faster.
Not so much the coffee
  when he gets to work after the pool,
  as her influence remaining
  in his almost pushing the decaff button.
Not what the figures show him,
  but how much they hint at
  of what could be known
  had he the figures he hasn't.
Not the nature of accountancy -
  its artifice posing as science, for example,
  or the inverse relationship he once saw claimed
  between the number of accountants
  and national growth rates -
  but its impact on the man he is,
  or any rate is seen to be, away from the office.
Not the perfume of the lilies
  as he trudges past the florist's on his way to TV,
  more the mould of as-yet-scentless air
  surrounding the spread of their fragrance.
Not what she said, the day that he gave her
  those parallel lillies along with his offer,
  but the speed of the silence which closed in to follow.
Not the impetus alcohol offers
  to a man who doesn't really drink,
  but how much of the bottle has nothing inside it tonight.
Not that he loved her, but how his life
  seems shaped for her still now she's gone.

Paul Carey-Kent

Notes

[i] WH Auden: *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-57* (Faber, 1966)

[ii] RS Thomas: *Collected Poems 1945-70* (Phoenix 1993)

[iii] John Powell Ward: *The Poetry of RS Thomas* (Poetry Wales Press, 2001)

[iv] Germain Bazin: *Impressionist Paintings in the Louvre* (Thames and Hudson, 1958)

[v] RS Thomas in *The Way of It* (Coelfrith Press, 1977)

[vi] Philip Larkin: *High Windows* (Faber, 1974)

[vii] Tony Curtis: *Taken for Pearls*, Seren 1993

[viii] E-mail interview with Tony Curtis, 8 May 2003

[ix] William Carlos Williams: *Collected Poems* (Palladin, 1991), p 385.

[x] Givin Turk: 'Brillo' in *Copper Jubilee*, The New Art Gallery, Walsall, June-Sept 2002

[xi] James Heffernan sets this out fully in *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago, 1993)

[xii] See, for example, the varied contents of the ekphrastic journal *Word and Object*

[xiii] Murray Kreiger: *Ekphrasis - The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (John Hopkins University Press 1992), p 4.

[xiv] ibid., p 7

[xv] Homer: *The Iliad*, Book 18.

[xvi] ibid., p 18

[xvii] ibid., p 13. This is not a straightforward claim, as the case for the primacy of the visual in the television age could equally well be made.

[xviii] Grant F Scott: *Copied with a difference:* ekphrasis *in William Carlos Williams' 'Pictures from Brueghel'* in 'Word and Image' 15.1, 1999.

[xix] Zsofia Ban: *Words, index fingers, gaps: the critique of language in the late poetry of William Carlos Williams and the conceptual art of Joseph Kosuth* in Word and Image 15.2, 1999.

[xx] Paul Durcan: *Give Me Your Hand* (Macmillan, 1994)

[xxi] Ibid. p 66

[xxii] Henry Sayre: *The Visual Text of William Carlos Williams* (University of Illinois Press, 1983)

[xxiii] By electronic tracking of eye movements, eg in a National Gallery exhibition in, I think, 1998, but the title of which I cannot now identify!

[xxiv] actually Williams is here describing a picture not now thought to be by or of Brueghel

[xxv] Sujata Bhatt: A Colour for Solitude (Carcanet, 2002)

[xxvi] Quoted in Brigitte Uhde-Stahl: *Paula Modersohn-Becker* (Belser Verlag, 1990), p 40

[xxvii] Ibid: p 17

[xxviii] Ibid: p 38

[xxix] Ibid: p 59

[xxx] Ibid., p 34

[xxxi] Ibid., p 67

[xxxii] Ibid., p 78

[xxxiii] Ibid., p 83

[xxxiv] Ibid., p 24

[xxxv] Ibid., p 31

[xxxvi] Ibid., p 39

[xxxvii] Ibid. p 72

[xxxviii] Ibid. p 79

[xxxix] Ibid. p 80

[xl] Ibid. p 89-90

[xli] Ibid., p 17

[xlii] Ibid., p 21

[xliii] Ibid., p 34

[xliv] Ibid., p 47

[xlv] Ibid., p 49

[xlvi] Ibid., p 56-7

[xlvii] Ibid., p 104

[xlviii] Ibid., p 48

[xlix] Ibid., p 19

[l] Ibid., p 36

[li] Ibid.,p 38

[lii] Ibid., p 53

[liii] Ibid., p 69

[liv] Ibid.,p 52

[lv] Ibid.,p 22

[lvi] Ibid.,p 69

[lvii] Ibid.,p 87

[lviii] Brigitte Uhde-Stahl: *Paula Modersohn-Becker* (Belser Verlag, 1990), p 7.

[lix] Ibid., p 38

[lx] Ibid., p 74

[lxi] Ibid., p 41

[lxii] ie Mural, 1961, which if not wholly abstract is treated as such by Alvi

[lxiii] Charles Tomlinson: 'Netherlands' in xxx

[lxiv] There is a small curiosity here in that Tomlinson spells the name 'Mondriaan': the artist dropped the second 'a' from his name after 1912, which could suggest that Tomlinson is thinking of a pre-1912 picture, but as Mondrian didn't abandon curves until 1917 or reach his mature style until 1920, this seems more likely to be a mistake.

[lxv] Jamie McKendrick: 'Joseph Albers - Black Mountain, 1933/4' in Modern Painters, Winter 2002.

[lxvi] By way of background to McKendrick's poem, it helps to know that Albers was a German who trained and then taught and worked at the Bauhaus, specialising in painting on glass, until it was closed by the Nazis in 1933, when he emigrated to teach at Black Mountain College, North Carolina. The works for which he has become known are the series of 'homages to the square' from c 1950 to his death in 1976, which use a square within a square format to explore colour dynamics. McKendrick hints at but perhaps doesn't fully set out this background.

[lxvii] from a lecture in 1958, quoted in *Mark Rothko* (Tate, 1999, p. 87)

[lxviii] quoted in Lucie-Smith: *Live of the Great Twentieth Century Artists* (Thames & Hudson, 1999 p. 324)

[lxix] The Independent, 19.3.2002

[lxx] Lubbock, Ibid.

[lxxi] Tony Godfrey: *Conceptual Art* (Phaidon, 2000) p 5

[lxxii] See Appendix: *One Million Years*

[lxxiii] Jeff Wall: *Monochrome and Photojournalism in On Kawara's 'Today Paintings'* in Robert Lehmann (ed): Lectures on Contemporary Art (Dia Center, New York, 1996)

[lxxiv] David Batchelor: *In Bed with the Monochrome* in Peter Osborne (ed): From an Aesthetic Point of View: Philosophy, Art and the Senses (Serpent's Tail, 2000), p 163-8

[lxxv] op cit, p 158

[lxxvi] although there is in fact an unerased de Kooning on the obverse!

[lxxvii] See Appendix: *210 Coca-Cola Bottles*

[lxxviii] My interview with Tamar Yoseloff, 19.5.03

[lxxix] Ariadne, the daughter of King Minos of Crete, was half-sister of the Minatour . She was abandoned by her lover, Theseus, on the desert island of Naxos, after he had slain the Minatour and escaped from the labyrinth with the aid of her thread. The painting (indeed, over a hundred de Chirico paintings) shows her in the melancholy of her abandoned state, before the god Dionysus fell in love with her and, in marrying her, made her immortal. De Chirico joined the Italian Army in 1915 but due to intestinal troubles never saw active service. According to Micael Taylor (see the exhibition catalogue) his mother did move with his regiment to stay close to her son.

[lxxx] e.g. de Chirico's father was a leading engineer in the development of the Greek railway system, hence the train can stand rather economically for modernity, father and phallus